

20th Anniversary Solidarity Series

PBF 2009 Summer Fellow Briana Beltran



From her family history and through volunteering at a young age for organizations working with immigrant populations, Briana has grown to understand the challenges they face and has found motivation and inspiration.

What has been your career path since your Peggy Browning Fellowship?

“My fellowship was during my 1L summer at the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) in Los Angeles. I worked on a number of projects including researching preemption of state vs. municipal law in California, preparing for legislative visits during NDLON’s national assembly in Washington, DC and researching media coverage of immigration raids.

For my 2L summer, I was awarded an Equal Justice America Fellowship at Southern Migrant Legal Services (SMLS) in Nashville, TN, a branch office of Texas RioGrande Legal Aid. SMLS serves migrant farmworkers in a six-state service area (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee), largely focusing on employment litigation in federal court.

After graduating from New York University School of Law, I was a law clerk to a federal judge in Nashville and then spent almost four years as a staff attorney at SMLS. This past August, I relocated to Ithaca, NY and am now working as a clinical teaching fellow with the Farmworker Legal Assistance Clinic at Cornell Law School. The Clinic represents farmworkers on both immigration and employment matters, focusing on upstate New York. We also partner with regional and national organizations on projects affecting farmworkers’ rights more broadly.”

Did your Peggy Browning Fellowship affect your course of study in law school?

“Most definitely! I entered law school with two broad areas of interest: immigrants’ rights and international human rights. Through my Peggy Browning Fellowship at NDLON, I learned that my true passion was in the immigrants’ rights field, particularly as it intersected with employment or labor issues. In my second and third years of law school, I took courses on employment and labor law, including specialized seminars, and participated in two clinics heavily focused on immigration.”

Did your fellowship help you to obtain employment in labor law?

“Yes. My placement at NDLOM was not a placement in a traditional labor law setting. Instead, my fellowship focused on labor and the employment rights of immigrant workers generally. Since then, I have continued in that field. I think my Summer Fellowship gave me useful experience and helped me cultivate connections with other advocates that I have maintained to this day.”



Have the interests or goals of today’s law students changed from your years in school?

“Not that I have seen so far. Public interest law students, and particularly those who are interested in labor/employment issues, are often outnumbered by their peers. But they are passionate about their interests and seek out opportunities—at their law school and through summer internships—in that field. I think that was true when I was in law school and I’ve seen it to be true today, both through students I’ve interviewed for internship positions over the years and students with whom I’m working now at Cornell. It’s refreshing to know that there are students out there who care about this work and are doing all they can to continue in the field after graduation!”

Are you connected to other PBF alumni? Are you active in your area’s Alumni Association Chapter?

“Currently I am not, due to my location. Nevertheless, about two and a half years ago, I participated as an alumna on a panel of the Peggy Browning Fund Regional Workshop Program at Vanderbilt Law School, and I was very happy to be able to support PBF by doing so. I was excited to be able to speak to Vanderbilt students about the opportunities PBF provides and the experience of being a Summer Fellow. Other panelists included current and former labor and employment lawyers. As a relatively young attorney, I also appreciated the opportunity to learn from their years of experience and get to know like-minded advocates.”

What advice would you give to today’s students who are considering a career in labor or public interest law?

“I think the most important thing is to stay true to who you are. In law school, it’s very easy to give in to the pressure to go down the same path and work at a corporate firm. Public interest students really have to double down and put in extra work to seek out the path less traveled. Look for groups and events at your school that are of interest to you, make connections with practitioners, and don’t be afraid to reach out to them for advice, or to ask about opportunities at their organizations! Once you’re out of law school and practicing in fields like labor and employment law or immigrants’ rights law, you’ll see that these are all relatively small circles of advocates who know each other and care deeply about the work that they do.

If you’re a law student interested in labor/employment issues, I’d highly encourage you to apply for a Peggy Browning Fellowship. PBF offers tremendous opportunities both geographically and by type of placement, from union, to labor-side firm, to workers’ centers and legal aid organizations. I’d also encourage Peggy Browning Fellows to attend the national conference at the conclusion of your fellowship summer. It’s a tremendous opportunity to learn about the exciting work that your colleagues are doing and to build and expand networks with other practitioners.”