I’ve had the great opportunity to work with the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services during the summer of 2012. I originally had applied for it last year, but due to unseen medical reasons, I was unable to work. However, Mr. Stephens, the attorney that I worked with, was more than willing to give me a second chance to complete this internship, which I took to volunteering for one day a week, beginning in January 2012. I thought at that point that I had gained some semblance of what a day at the DCS office might look like, but it wasn’t until I was there every day, that I understood the gravity of the situations that the children experience, and realized that the people in DCS are extraordinary folks.

From about Spring Break (when I first found out I had received the internship at DCS - again), whenever I told someone that I would be working with the Department of Children’s Services, I received wide-eyed stares and shocked faces, followed by words of warning or advice on how to handle the terrible and awful experiences I was about to encounter. Many people that I spoke with stated that I would come out a different person, changed by the horrors that I had seen from the abuse and neglect of children. Others stated that the emotions of reading and seeing the cases would take their toll on me, that I would have to find ways to deal with the stress. My career options before I started the internship was either to focus on law school (yet not knowing which field to enter) or look at graduate schools, focusing on political
science. Even though I am not on any decisive track (i.e. pre-med), after this summer, I am more confident through my experiences at DCS that I know what kind of work I would like to do.

The morning of the first day of work for me and the other intern was spent at the Coffee County Judicial Center in Manchester, TN, listening to continuing court cases, along with any new petitions that had been received over the weekend. All in all, juvenile court proceedings start at 8:30 and last until about noon. If necessary, it can be continued on at one, until the matter has been completed. The first day however, court was proceeding after one, and when we returned to the office, it was nearly 3 p.m. I was enlisted to sit in on a meeting, a CFTM (Child, Family & Team Meeting) beginning at 4:00. I was told that as the legal intern, I would just be sitting, representing the legal department. I was to take notes, and report on anything that would be necessary for future court hearings. It was supposed to be a peaceful meeting, and I was to sit and learn how DCS works together, regardless of the divisions inside.

The meeting was different than expected. As soon as the family entered, the tension in the air immediately thickened, and you could see that in the family's mind, we were the on the offensive team, and they were being defensive for the sake of the child. The child sat at the furthest end of the table, with her arms crossed, with her grandmother and great-grandmother next to her. This girl (which at 16 years old, I wouldn't classify her as a kid) had had a rough childhood. Her mother was not actively participating in her life, only showing up when she need money or drugs. The father was nowhere to be found, and the family's situation wasn't providing the structure and support that this teenager needed to overcome her own problems, and learn how to deal with new problems that would emerge in the future. The grandmother & great-grandmother soon broke down after the meeting started, knowing that they have tried to help the girl, but also knowing that keeping the teenager with them would only cause her to follow down the path that her mother had been caught on.
My primary job this summer was to catch up on the overdue legal work and to gather and track parents whose children had become involved with DCS. Overall, it was a little exhausting, often calling twenty people to come up with 30 different answers, with not one being the exact answer another one had given. It was frustrating at parts, especially when the times I was spent on the phone, and on people search sites, outweighed any actual physical human contact (usually happened about once every two weeks). As an intern, our job was to contact these parents through whatever means necessary, mainly summonses, getting them to court on the correct date, in order for the legal proceedings to proceed at a rate to reunify the parents with the children. The goal of DCS is obviously not to tear families apart, yet offer all and any resources available to keep the family together, helping them to overcome any problems, and help to prevent further ones from arising. There are some families that have a long history of DCS involvement, and sometimes that history allows for the kids to be removed, and placed into a better home.

At the beginning of the summer, the attorney and our supervisor, James Stephens, gave us a handbook on how the “system” works: first, a referral comes in, causing the Department to raise a flag – this basically means that the parents/children/guardians have done something wrong. The legal department files a petition based on the allegations, and it has to be heard in court within 72 business hours. The next step is the preliminary hearing, where there is “probable cause that the children are dependent and neglected” presented to the court. After that, there’s the adjudicatory hearing, in which “there is clear and convincing evidence that these children are dependent and neglected”. After this hearing, the way the cases are handled, differ between the custodial (foster care) kids and the non-custodial (placed with a relative) kids.

My other responsibilities this summer included drafting various court documents (orders, motions & petitions), contacting process servers to get subpoenas/summonses out to witnesses or parents, or calling the opposing counsel to set court dates. There was always something that
needed to be done for court preparation. Towards the middle of the summer, I was able to go on several home-visits to understand what the social workers’ job entailed. I frequently sat in on meetings with attorneys, families and case managers (CFTM), and sat in on multiple depositions at various attorneys' offices. While I was in court, I was able to talk with other attorneys, and join the attorneys in the judge’s chambers to hear him discuss the relevant problems/issues that he might have. I understood early on that Coffee County Juvenile Court has a great group of dedicated attorneys that all work well together. I was once told that regardless of what happens in the courtroom, it’s not personal. If one attorney badgers another attorney’s witness, it’s not a personal attack on that specific person; they’re just doing their job.

I’ve sat in on forensic interviews of children, at the Child Advocacy Center, understanding the way that sexual abuse cases are handled. I was given the opportunity to be exposed to every aspect of the juvenile court system, and am to this day, extremely grateful for all the people who let an intern stand in on such an emotional process.

While this internship turned out to be more than I ever expected, the hardest part for me was the emotional toll that it took on me. Opening the files, I would be confronted with medical reports, photos and videos, case notes and depositions from counselors and doctors that never stated good things. It was especially hard on court dates, when I would have read the file beforehand, putting faces to the file. Most of the time, I felt frustration that I was only making a small dent in a never ending cycle, never getting through the pile that would continue to grow. However, I do feel good that I was helping the “good guys” out for a short period.

It also helped that the people at DCS are some of the most excited and dedicated people to their jobs that you will ever meet. They would work at all hours in order to get these kids in a good foster home or in a situation where they might feel safe. Even though there were times in which they would complain, the times in which they were excited about their work outweighed everything else. You can easily tell that these people are dedicated to their work,
and it’s nice to know that there are people out there willing to take on these tough and emotional situations. The case managers understand that sometimes parents catch a bad break, but they offer all resources available to them in order to get these parents back on track. My supervisor, Attorney James Stephens is by far the most remarkable person in that office. It’s my belief that this internship could have turned out a lot differently than it did if I didn’t have the guidance and mentorship that James offered me. It’s fascinating to watch him in court, pulling out the file, and knowing exactly every single detail about that case, just based on a cursory glance, regardless of how much time had passed since it was last in court. It was an honor that James let two interns tag-a-long with him wherever he went, and was more than willing for us to give our opinions, and to talk things out with him. We were able to ask any question (throughout the whole summer, I’m more than positive I asked the same question about 50 billion times) and he would often explain it, often delving off into a side-note that made connected the whole story. More often than not, when drafting court orders, he would give us constructive criticism on how we could incorporate more “legal jargon”. He made the learning process fun for us, creating a work environment that I was excited to come to everyday.

This internship challenged me, tested my emotional boundaries, and taught myself some important life lessons along the way. I was honestly scared at the beginning that I would get so caught up in this work, that I would be lost at all times, with the importance of everything. But the determination I saw at the office rubbed off on me. I now have no fear calling a prison, trying to find an incarcerated parent, or calling the police department, gathering case records or etc. I’ve also gained the most intensive drug education that I hope I can apply one day, and I’m sure I will probably accidently type “benzodiazepines” or “methamphetamines” in a research paper, as it took me all of one week to get the spelling down and memorized. This internship was about juggling multiple cases, being open to having things thrown at your face at a fast rate, and
making the work what you want it to be. You had to have a great attitude, a dedicated work ethic, and people that inspired you to work as hard as they do.

The DCS work is often portrayed as the evil ones, removing kids from their parents, but in all actuality, they play a pivotal role in the general welfare of our society. The importance of juvenile law is often overlooked, and I’m proud to say that I was a part of the dedicated juvenile crowd of Coffee County. There are no words to describe how grateful I am for my experience, and I can’t thank the DCS office in Coffee County enough for allowing me the opportunity to be a part of their family.