

# 2022 DIVERSITY & INCLUSION SCHOLARSHIP

APPLICATION ESSAY  
BY NOEMI REYES



**A**cuerdo con la fiscalía? Negociación de la pena? Acuerdo de culpabilidad? I scrolled through Google Translate’s suggestions, trying to decide which phrase best captured “plea deal.” This was a sensitive felony-level case; I had to get the language just right.

My client was a teenage girl. Her stepfather had sexually abused her since her early childhood, and she was finally taking legal action against him. I was on the phone with her father, who lived in another state, spoke only Spanish, and until now had been unaware of the abuse.

As a victim advocate intern and the only Spanish speaker in the state attorney’s office, I was tasked not only with supporting the victim, but also with updating her family on the case. In the end, I went with “acuerdo de culpabilidad,” which translates to “an agreement of culpability.” I needed this family to know we were fighting to hold the defendant accountable.

Although I had heard about the underrepresentation of minority attorneys in the legal field, it was shocking to absorb the implications of that gap in real-time. My experiences at the state attorney’s office sparked in me a desire to advocate for diverse groups, especially Spanish-speaking minorities.

I applied to be a victim advocate intern because I wanted to speak for those affected by domestic and family violence. As part of my role, I accompanied victims to first appearance hearings, depositions, and trials. I also took intake reports and helped survivors present their victim impact statements. And, though it wasn’t in my job description, I often found myself serving as an unofficial translator.

Although the state attorney’s office hired professional legal interpreters for major events like trials, it was difficult to secure translation services for brief, day-to-day tasks, like providing minor case updates to Spanish speaking families.

Though I am a native Spanish speaker, terms such as “the burden of proof,” “due process,” and “plea deal” had never made it into my colloquial Spanish use. But without my poorly worded interpretations, many families would have been left in the dark until their cases were already settled. I worked hard to cobble together knowledge of legal Spanish so I could provide them with what English-speaking families would so easily receive – updates on their cases.

I also often felt like a cultural translator. I remember encountering a frightened-looking woman in our office lobby one day. After I greeted her in Spanish, she told me she did not understand why she had been subpoenaed. Weeks prior, she’d had a dispute with her husband and sustained injuries. Law enforcement became involved, but she did not know that the state wanted to prosecute her husband on domestic violence charges. All she knew was what she had pieced

together from her subpoena letter: that she could be held in jail if she did not come in that day. I picked up on her unspoken concerns. “The attorney will not ask about your immigration status today,” I reassured her.

On another occasion, I accompanied a Spanish-speaking client to court. She was seeking a permanent injunction against her husband, who had abused her for years. The judge asked my client why she had never called the police on her husband or sought a divorce. What the judge did not know, and what my client could not say publicly, was that she feared talking to the police because she was undocumented.

And though an interpreter was present, he could not translate the cultural factors preventing my client from seeking a divorce: she was Roman Catholic and felt certain that filing for divorce would have made her an outcast within her already small circle of support. The judge dismissed her case for lack of evidence.

My experience as a victim advocate intern made me recognize that there is a subgroup of people – Spanish speakers, Latinx people, and undocumented people – who face unique barriers to seeking services. Even when professional translators are available, there is a gap in cultural translation that often remains unbreached within the legal system.

To put it more simply – minorities are underrepresented in the legal field, and therefore a gap exists in serving these diverse groups.

I have always strived to be a voice for victims of crimes and their families. But my experiences at the state attorney’s office showed me that to truly advocate for the people I met there, I need to be on the legal side of the process. I need to continue committing myself to diversity and inclusion efforts.

As an attorney, I hope to provide legal services to Latinx clients, especially immigrants and undocumented people. In addition to advocating for individual clients through litigation, I can also imagine doing policy work with the aim of protecting undocumented workers’ rights.

In law school, I hope to take courses in immigration law and policy and international human rights and gain experience working on immigration cases through clinics. I would also be eager to write for a law journal, where I would like to explore the changing laws around undocumented youths’ rights.

As a lawyer, I hope to be more than a translator. I hope to be a bridge--someone who brings people the resolutions they seek while serving as a strong support along the way. In providing my clients with diverse and inclusive legal representation, I aspire to give them the care and understanding they deserve.