

My Day as a Judge

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As a member of the professional services team, the non-legal side of the Firm, I have few reasons to ever enter a courthouse. Unlike my colleagues in our Litigation Department, my role at the Firm does not require me to observe hearings, converse with judges, or discuss the legal and administrative challenges that are pervasive in our court system. Yet, last week I found myself doing just that. Through a program called “[Judge for a Day](#)” organized by [Legal Information for Families Today \(LIFT\)](#), I had the unique opportunity to join the LIFT staff at the Kings County Family Court in downtown Brooklyn for a fully immersive court experience.

As a non-profit organization, LIFT provides high-quality legal information and expert guidance to families so that they can successfully represent themselves in New York Family Court and secure access to community resources. Every day, LIFT staff are in the Family Courthouses in all five boroughs of New York providing immediate answers and guidance to those confused and overwhelmed by the court system. Additionally, staff who monitor LIFT’s [bilingual helpline](#) answer calls, emails, and live chat about questions on family law matters from across the state. The organization is also currently testing [new technology](#) that would enable volunteer attorneys offering pro bono services the ability to connect with litigants through a virtual conversation via videoconference.

As LIFT continues to expand its outreach and its impact, the need for volunteers grows. The “Judge for a Day” program provides new and prospective volunteers with a comprehensive introduction to the New York City Family Courts and LIFT’s work with those they serve. After receiving a brief orientation, we divided into small groups and followed the LIFT staff inside the hearing rooms where we had the opportunity to shadow the presiding judges. In the two hours that we spent alternating between rooms, I was able to witness a number of different judges oversee a variety of cases. Each family that came before the judge was in the midst of a challenging situation fraught with high emotion, frustration and anxiety. However, the most heartbreaking aspect was the clear lack of resources among the families present, as they desperately strived to navigate the complexities of the court with whatever assistance, if any, their limited means could afford. Yet, these families were not without hope.

As we entered each courtroom, judges and their court officers often greeted us with a smile or courteous welcome when they took note of the purple lanyards around our necks, the signifier that we were guests of LIFT. After the morning hearings, many of the judges joined us for lunch in an upstairs conference room, organized by LIFT. In addition to taking time out of their busy schedule to speak with us, each judge expressed their gratitude to LIFT and the room full of volunteers. It quickly became evident that LIFT plays a vital role, one for which judges are extremely grateful.

By providing free legal information, including step by step resource guides and in-person assistance, LIFT helps clarify the often confusing processes of Family Court. When litigants appear before a judge with correct documentation and a clearer understanding of the legal issues before them, they are able to take full advantage of their allotted time before the judge and move more quickly on their path to a legal remedy for their family. Judges therefore often refer litigants to LIFT to ensure that the families who come before them are best prepared for the issue at hand.

Throughout my day as a “judge,” I made no judgment on the cases I viewed. Instead, I served as a witness to a truly remarkable partnership. Even with the ever-growing caseload and about 80% of the litigants unrepresented, the judges I met in the Kings County Family Court set a tone of empathy and worked tirelessly to reach the best possible resolution for each family. It is evident that the system, as it is currently set up, is highly strained and severely under resourced. As LIFT continues to offer a variety of resources that enable families to succeed, I believe that Family Court judges will continue to welcome purple-lanyard-clad volunteers with open arms.

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