

# The Fast Track to Early-Career First-Chair Experience

New lawyers — particularly those working at large law firms — often find themselves trapped in a Catch-22: they can't get on-their-feet, client-facing, first-chair experience without already having on-their-feet, client-facing, first-chair experience. Volunteering for Metro Volunteer Lawyers offers a way out of this vicious circle. As MVL volunteers, new lawyers get the chance to have their own clients, take first-chair responsibility drafting pleadings and negotiating with opponents, and even stand up and examine witnesses and argue at trial (though, these days, perhaps via a videoconference). And for those lawyers who do volunteer, they can obtain this kind of high-quality, sought-after experience all while performing public service and doing some good in the world.

Below are just a few examples of early-career MVL volunteer lawyers who obtained priceless experience representing deserving, underprivileged clients. After graduating from the University of Colorado Law School and clerking for two appellate judges, **Alex White** joined the litigation practice at Davis Graham & Stubbs in 2017. In January of 2018, he agreed to take on an allocation of parental responsibilities and child support case through MVL. His client was a young mother seeking sole parental rights over her 2-year-old son and retroactive child support from the father. The mother had obtained protection orders due to domestic violence, but the case had dragged on for nearly a year before Alex got involved. When Alex took the case, the client had a permanent orders hearing scheduled in a month and Alex hit the ground running. He met with the client, reviewed the record, and ultimately negotiated what he thought was going to be a joint resolution with the unrepresented father.

It didn't quite turn out that way, though. The father ultimately backed out of the set-

tlement and Alex represented his client at a permanent orders hearing in district court in Jefferson County. He introduced exhibits, presented the mother's direct testimony, cross-examined the father, and argued the statutory factors to the court, all on the way to a complete victory for his client.

"It was the first time I introduced evidence through a witness. It was the first time I conducted a cross-examination. It was the first time I did a closing argument," observed Alex. In fact, "it was the first time I had been by myself in a courtroom with my client there." Alex had no prior experience in family law, but he was assigned a mentor through MVL, and while "there were certainly moments at which I felt a little underwater, I made it through. I put my head down and figured it out." Alex has since moved in-house with Vail Resorts, but his MVL experience will continue to serve him in good stead for years to come.

Alex's experience isn't unique. **Andy Ball** is a 2017 University of Colorado Law School grad and an associate at Faegre Drinker Biddle & Reath, LLP. Through his firm's long-time support of MVL's Post-Decree Clinic, Andy was able to take on a child support dispute, representing a mother seeking increased child support. The Denver County Department of Human Services had become involved, but after filing an initial motion, the case had languished until Andy came on board. He untangled the procedural posture and dealt with the DHS attorneys to move the case to a point where it was ready for decision. He met with his client for hours, discussed what he needed in terms of documents and potential testimony, and generally worked up the facts of the case.

Andy's case ultimately went to a mediation facilitated by Denver DHS. At the mediation, Andy represented his client in negotiations with the unrepresented father. It was "in a courtroom, even if we weren't

before a judge. It was a great opportunity for me to speak on my client's behalf and be an advocate for her in a setting that had real stakes." After a lengthy negotiation, Andy was able to convince the father to agree to a result that was very favorable for his client and the court entered his proposed order the next day.

"In a lot of my practice," Andy said, "I'm only one of several lawyers working on any given case and that means I'm very far from the final decision maker on things that translate into real action in the litigation." Volunteering with MVL "provided an opportunity for me to sit in the driver's seat." He had a mentor who "was there to make sure I didn't drive the car off the road, but I made the decisions on my own about how to talk to our client, how to respond in mediation, and how to navigate the court process."

And it's not just through full-representation referrals that MVL offers invaluable experience. **JD Schneider**, another Faegre BD associate, regularly volunteers at MVL's Post-Decree Clinic, providing legal advice on a drop-in basis. JD practices in patent litigation, in which "you're working on very large cases for very large corporations, so you don't get that exposure and that one-on-one, personal connection with a client. I think that's important for attorneys. It's a nice experience to have a real one-on-one connection with a client."


**Tina Van Bockern**, an associate at Holland & Hart, also volunteers at the Post-Decree Clinic: "I feel like even if I just spend an hour with a client, it's a big deal for them. It's their children, their livelihood, their ability to support themselves. With a comparatively small time commitment on my side, I can make a difference and help them in a way that uses skills that I have and they don't."

One thing all of these volunteers agreed on is that their respective law firms were

very supportive of their work for MVL. Tina reported that Holland & Hart “works around my schedule when I want to attend the clinic, supports that work, and recognizes my commitment in my evaluations and annual reviews.” For Alex, “I got plenty of congrats at the end of my case — partners were happy with me representing the firm in the community.” And for Andy, “Faegre treats MVL work just as it treats paying clients, and for younger associates the firm recognizes that these types of opportunities give us the chance to get experience and sharpen skills we don’t get in other matters. Everyone at the firm was very supportive.”

And to complement their can-do spirit, all of these young lawyer volunteers were given access to MVL-provided mentors with collective decades of experience in family law, as well as MVL-sponsored CLEs, and other educational activities. Alex worked closely with his MVL mentor, scheduling multiple meetings and calls, and having his mentor in the gallery during his hearing.

Andy worked with a FaegreBD partner, Todd Walker, who is a longtime MVL Post-Decree Clinic volunteer and has a wealth of experience through that program. Andy was also able to attend an MVL CLE on family law that featured a Colorado magistrate judge as a speaker. And Tina appreciates that when she volunteers at an MVL clinic, there is always an MVL staff member present who knows all of the ins and outs of the relevant area of law. MVL volunteers are always well-supported when they are venturing into a new area of law.

So if you are looking for real-world, on-your-feet experience working with clients and in court, give MVL a try. Contact Ivonne Esparza at [iesparza@denbar.org](mailto:iesparza@denbar.org), or visit the MVL website at [denbar.org/mvl](http://denbar.org/mvl) for more information or to sign up! 

**KYLE BRENTON** is an Assistant United States Attorney with the Department of Justice. Before joining the DOJ, Kyle practiced appellate litigation at Davis Graham & Stubbs and Childs McCune LLC.

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