

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT: USAMA IBRAHIM, CLASS OF 2020

By Rebekah Gordon

Northwestern Law, Class of 2020

If you meet him, you'll be introduced to the most contagious laugh and smile on campus. But did you know that Usama is a certified mediator? In addition to handling mediation sessions in courts around Illinois, Usama is the President of the Muslim Law Students Association, Street Law, and Habeas Chorus. Through his affiliations at Northwestern, he has participated in service trips to Houston, Texas where he helped a legal aid clinic in the wake of Hurricane Harvey and to Tijuana, Mexico to assist asylum-seekers. He'll be spending next summer in a boutique litigation firm in NYC doing antitrust and corporate accountability work.

Here is what he has to say about the mediation skills he's learned here at Northwestern Law.

What interested you in the negotiation and/or mediation courses at Northwestern?

I enrolled in coursework with the Center on Negotiation and Mediation's coursework so that I could become a more attentive listener, a more effective communicator, and a more welcoming collaborator. Those skills were not only skills that I thought would make me a better lawyer, advocate, or mediator, but a more impactful ally, public servant, and friend.

What was one memorable lesson you learned during a course?

The most valuable lesson wasn't when I was mediating, but rather when I observed. As an observer in the *pro se* courtroom, I watched parties that failed to reach an agreement in mediation go before the judge. What horrified me was the fact that the whole case took less than two minutes. A judge asked plaintiff to share their complaint. The plaintiff shared briefly what bothered them, the judge then turned to defendant and asked, "is that true?" The defendant agreed. Without providing the defendant an opportunity to express their narrative nor the context, the judge ordered in favor of the plaintiff. Horrified by the brevity, I reflected on the mediation that I had with the parties only moments ago. The judgement that was ordered would not preserve the parties' relationship, a priority that both parties shared was of utmost importance. The judgement wasn't confidential, something that both parties expressed concern for. The judgement would force one of the parties into financial disarray, something that their counterpart in mediation did not want as a consequence. At every level of analysis of the judgement that the court ordered, neither party was pleased with the outcome. The system needs people who have these skills and are willing to commit themselves to service. The clinic provides students an opportunity to be of service to others—to identify the gaps of the justice system and to assume the mantle of leadership in its rectification.

Why do you think diversity is important in the ADR field?

When we're thinking about the next generation of advocates, mediators, and practitioners they must be inclusive, welcoming, and representative of diverse backgrounds and perspectives because having people

leading the development of ADR who understand and can relate to the people the ADR will apply to, makes ADR more effective. This is not only true of ADR, but true of all professional spaces where policies are being developed.

What would you say to a student contemplating whether to take a negotiation or mediation course?

If you're looking to become a better listener, take mediation. If you're looking to become a better advocate, take negotiation. If you're looking to explore justice systems beyond the ones currently in place, take restorative justice. Each course will allow you to recognize the various privileges and biases that are constantly at play, but almost never addressed, in alternative-dispute resolution contexts. The courses will also teach you a great deal about yourself. How aspirational do you tend to be? How do you respond when someone counteroffers in a negotiation? Can you bring biases to the forefront of your consciousness and address them while simultaneously listening to the parties for their needs and interests? These questions each pose a unique challenge that the courses will not only address but provide strategies for. If you're looking to be a more attentive listener, a more effective communicator, and a more welcoming collaborator, then the courses are for you.