From the Selected Works of Flynn M. Coleman

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Boalt Student Action Figures: Flynn Coleman~Water Worker

Andrew Cohen

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/flynn_coleman/5/
There’s a saying that Flynn Coleman ’08 likes to tack onto her outgoing emails: “Life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass. It’s about learning to dance in the rain.”

Coleman’s recent semester in the parched West African nation of Senegal didn’t offer any opportunities for dancing in the rain. But it did make her realize that humanity’s most basic need—water—is also one of its knottiest legal problems, and that she wants to help do something about it.

As a research assistant for Professor Laurent Mayali on a project for the Institute for Global Challenges and the Law, Coleman plunged into the treacherous currents of water resource governance and its legal underpinnings in sub-Saharan Africa. Working with Senegalese water experts and law professors, she teased out the intricate tangle of Islamic, customary, and statutory laws that can make an already scant resource even scarcer. “Water crises affect millions of people, with a disproportionate impact on those most vulnerable,” the 3L student says.

In the capital city of Dakar, Coleman saw the water routinely shut off without explanation. She lobbied both public agencies and private companies for answers. “There are many obstacles to advocating for a recognized right to water because the issues are tied up in politics and class. I had to accept that I was a visitor in a place foreign to my own perceptions of how legal research works, and that I had to form relationships before I could get helpful information.”

What she did learn was hard to swallow. Each year, more than 2.2 million people in developing countries die from preventable diseases linked to lack of access to safe drinking water and inadequate sanitation. More than 40 percent of sub-Saharan Africans are forced to use unsafe drinking water, and improving that alarming statistic won’t be easy. “The legal structures surrounding equitable water rights there are very fragile,” Coleman says. “There are no quick fixes, and people must continue to drink from the only sources they have.”

Coleman’s African sojourn was not her first brush with social injustice. As a 1L, she worked with Boalt’s California Asylum Representation Clinic to help a Guatemalan human rights activist gain refuge. In year two, she drafted an appeal decision before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Like those experiences, Coleman says her stint in Senegal—where she took courses in both Islamic and Senegalese constitutional law—was powerfully moving and “an incredible learning opportunity.” Coleman is a past co-director of the Boalt Hall Committee for Human Rights, a student organization, and remains active with the group.

“We may take fair access to safe water for granted here in the West,” she says, “but in many parts of the world it’s truly a matter of life and death.”

—Andrew Cohen

Flynn Coleman, ’08