



Mary-Kathryn Smith '19 and Adena Wayne '17 Awarded Public Interest Fellowships

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Mary-Kathryn Smith '19 will work to challenge executions of death row prisoners that are conducted in secret. And Adena Wayne '17 will represent transgender defendants who have faced employment discrimination.

Smith and Wayne are the recipients of two public interest fellowships from Cornell Law School that will allow them to pursue legal projects they are passionate about beginning next fall.

The Robert B. Kent Public Interest Fellowship was awarded to Smith, who will work at the Federal Community Defender Office for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania—Capital Habeas Unit in Philadelphia. And the Frank H.T. Rhodes Public Interest Fellowship was given to Wayne, who will work at New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG) in Manhattan.

“These fellowships are an incredibly important way for our graduates to get into public interest organizations,” said Akua Akyea, assistant dean for public service at the Law School. “A lot of public interest organizations can’t hire right out of law school so this is an important way for our students to not only do great and needed work, but also to get an entry into public service work.”

Smith learned about the problem of states shielding executions from the press when she interned at the Federal Community Defender Office last summer. The issue often arises when executioners administer a cocktail of drugs that don’t work properly and the prisoner starts to struggle, leading officials to draw a curtain to conceal the process, she said.



Mary-Kathryn Smith '19

“The core of the problem is the press has a right to view an execution and report on it and tell people in America how we’re executing our prisoners,” Smith said. “What’s interesting about this project is you can be pro-death penalty, and you can still agree that we need to be transparent in how we’re carrying out the process.” In her yearlong fellowship, Smith will create resources for the Philadelphia Capital Habeas Unit to use to file First Amendment challenges for transparency in pending executions for death row inmates. “It is truly life-changing to receive this fellowship,” she said. “This is really just one of the most incredible experiences that I’ve ever had and I’m so excited about the project.”