

# Zooming Through a Summer Associate Experience at Ward and Smith

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*[ Ed. Note: This article is authored by our 2020 Summer Associate Lily Faulconer.]*

**Strong mentor relationships with highly respected attorneys and the promise to be an integral part of cutting-edge work in each of the firm's five offices from the mountains to the sea are the hallmarks of Ward and Smith's Summer Associate Program and the reason law students eagerly seek out the experience.**

After interviewing, I was thrilled to be selected as one of six Summer Associates and envisioned a summer full of intense learning and professional growth. I tackled my law school classes with renewed diligence and then suddenly, the world shifted. Law school classes transitioned to online. Stay at home orders lingered, and my fellow law school students and I began to wonder what this could mean for the legal field and specifically, what it meant for our summer experiences.

While my law classes were shifting, so was Ward and Smith. Providing the best service requires adapting to—and sometimes even pioneering—change. Ward and Smith did just that as they seamlessly transitioned to remote work, leveraging their investments in technology to effectively serve their clients in a COVID-climate.

While many firms chose to cancel summer experiences, Ward and Smith recrafted theirs, designing a practical and meaningful learning experience in a time where traditional methods of education and assembly were not possible. The firm condensed their Summer Associate program from six to three weeks without sacrificing the professional and personal development opportunities they have historically offered.

My Summer Associate position did not look like the one I originally envisioned, but the firm's plethora of resources and their technological capacity provided unique opportunities to connect and learn. Just as I would have in the traditional summer associate program, I enjoyed meetings with numerous attorneys and staff to discuss assignments, legal trends, best practices, and what it is like to develop and lead at Ward and Smith.

I engaged in significant research and writing projects with real-world implications. I was able to visit each of the firm's offices, even if through the screen. The views I've enjoyed were captured on webcams during Zoom sessions and the "travel" between offices has been wickedly fast. With the click of my mouse, I attend morning meetings in Greenville, dash over to Raleigh before lunch, and spend afternoons in New Bern. My

assignments have presented challenging research topics, and each attorney for whom I have worked has been eager to answer questions and review work product to provide suggestions for improvement.

On just the second day of my summer experience, I was “attending” court with one of the firm’s attorneys in Asheville while sitting in my apartment in Chapel Hill. Listening in on a phone hearing was not the way I’d pictured my first real “in-court” experience, but through it, I was able to learn how to maintain confidence and navigate an argument when it is not possible to rely on traditional methods of communication such as eye contact or body language. As technology continues to guide the evolution of law practice, experiences like this one will only strengthen my ability to confidently and effectively represent the interests of my clients no matter the environment in which I am placed.

Virtual interactions cannot replace the value of in-person connection, but they do provide unique insights and windows into the lives of others that may take many interactions to uncover in a traditional work environment. I have witnessed ways in which attorneys across the five locations are collaborating to achieve the best results and felt the strong sense of community that extends far beyond the walls of the offices. Meaningfully contributing to the firm’s work, evaluating pressing issues, and receiving direct, individualized feedback occurred simultaneously as professional relationships were built. With many attorneys and staff still teleworking, I’ve also had the pleasure of strengthening personal relationships by meeting (or hearing) dogs, cats, and children during conversations and found great solace in the fact that my pet isn’t the only one with a blatant disregard for a teleconference or Zoom etiquette.

The practice of law will undoubtedly face more challenges in the future, but Ward and Smith will rise to meet them. I am grateful for a summer experience at a firm that anticipates and skillfully navigates disruptions in the legal field in a way that prioritizes the needs of their clients, colleagues, and communities. If you are a student looking to work in an environment where you will feel valued, challenged, and energized about the future and practice of law, the Summer Associate experience (in-person or virtually) at Ward and Smith is for you.

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