



[Elizabeth Pederson](#) is an alumna of Stanford Law School (2007) and its clinical programs. Elizabeth currently works as [General Counsel and Director of Operations](#) at Aqua-Spark, a social impact fund that invests in companies around the world along the sustainable aquaculture value chain, from farming and feed ingredients to technology and antibiotic-free disease battling. Before this, Elizabeth’s career spanned various jurisdictions nationally and internationally, from Assistant District Attorney in New York City, to the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California, the San Francisco City Attorney’s Office, and the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. While in law school, Elizabeth focused on public interest work as a Public Interest Fellow and graduated with *pro bono* distinction. In addition, while at SLS she founded [Ms. JD](#), a nonprofit dedicated to the success of women in law school and the legal profession. While Elizabeth attended SLS before MLC was founded, she participated in two clinics: one on the death penalty and one that took her to Ghana for a month to work with residents in a camp for displaced persons.

In September 2019, Elizabeth briefly shared with us her experience with SLS’s clinics and how this informed her unique career journey:

My law school admissions essay was about my time volunteering in a refugee camp: from the beginning, my desire to be a lawyer was linked with a commitment to human rights work, but my career has not been a straight line. I have learned that the scope of “human rights advocate” is much broader than I conceived when forming my original career vision and can apply to a variety of jobs that aim to improve the lot of humanity, especially of those who are disenfranchised and most in need of an

advocate. At this stage in my career, I've provided direct services, and I've also worked for systemic change, which has left me with an appreciation for the importance of both approaches.

Working as a general counsel, I do some big picture work—for example, related to a new fund that will focus on aquaculture in Africa, but I also spend a lot of time on day-to-day matters in contract and regulatory law. At first blush, this role feels less connected to human rights than previous roles in which I worked directly with victims. But when I take a step back, my current work has more of a chance to save lives and prevent suffering in the coming decades through supporting an industry that will lead to food security. Without a global focus on developing affordable protein sources, this type of food security may not develop at all, or may develop in a way that harms the environment. All the companies in which we invest must agree to a Shared Values Manifesto that builds environmental standards and a living wage, among other protections, into the foundational documents of the company, ensuring that business will be done in a better way. While the legal work I do for Aqua-Spark is more contractual than in my previous roles, I am still working to address an important global problem.

Aquaculture is currently the fastest growing food system in the world, with 2/3 of its growth ahead. Virtually everyone agrees we have to get this industry right to generate enough nutritious food for the expected population growth over the next thirty years. From that perspective, this is certainly a human rights issue. Plus, if current trends continue, the ocean will become a biological desert by 2050 because of overfishing, so aquaculture also protects our wild spaces for the next generation. By supporting aquaculture in Sub-Saharan Africa—where local fish are largely exported—our partners not only bring fish to local communities and help combat malnutrition, but also create jobs that lead to community growth. While the work I am doing now is a significant shift from trial work, my commitment to having a career that positively impacts human rights remains unchanged. Development projects and social impact don't have short-term results, but the promotion of global human rights is a long game.

SLS clinical education was a crucial stepping stone to my diverse career. The clinics allowed me access to experiences that shaped my world view and reaffirmed my commitment to public interest work. My time in Ghana, working mostly with refugees from the conflict in Liberia, gave me exposure to the application of international human rights law, which was the foundation for my later interest in the ICC. And the death penalty clinic provided the most visceral experience I had in law school, interviewing death row inmates at San Quentin and working on their cases. Neither of these experiences could have been possible outside of a legal clinic. It was Professor Larry Marshall, who led the death penalty clinic at the time, who encouraged me to pursue an early career in prosecution, as prosecutors were uniquely situated to prevent wrongful convictions and apply a different lens to charging decisions.

If not for the clinic, I'm not sure I would have ended up at the Manhattan District Attorney's Office, where I focused on sex trafficking and domestic violence cases. Working for the legendary public servant Robert Morgenthau in an office that gave prosecutors freedom to dismiss cases and employ liberal alternatives to incarceration was very rewarding. At the same time, working with vulnerable populations can come with high emotional stakes. I remember staying up all night to prepare closing arguments in domestic violence cases where the victims had spent years convincing themselves that no one would believe the reality of their abuse—I couldn't imagine having to tell them that a jury had acquitted their abuser. It is a privilege to do work you believe in, but if you are doing it the right way, you will not remain unaffected. Working at the San Francisco City Attorney's Office was a change of pace in that I began to advocate more on paper than in front of juries in civil affirmative litigation cases that took on policies that affected more victims than most crimes.

While I enjoyed both of these experiences, I had always wanted to work in international law and was lucky enough to have the opportunity to join the ICC, first as a Visiting Professional as part of the team that created an inaugural Policy on Children and then as a Trial Lawyer. In that latter capacity, I contributed to investigations and prosecutions to bring to justice those responsible for horrific human tragedies. At its best, international criminal law will prevent suffering, deter future wrongs, and give victims an opportunity to bear witness. This work is hugely important, but it is not a time machine—justice does not bring back the dead and cannot fully heal the wounds of the survivors.

In my current role, I am working on preventing suffering that has not yet happened by reimagining a food system that, if successfully deployed, will play an important part in preventing future harms by conserving the oceans and providing food security. This type of preventative advocacy is the closest we can get to a time machine—predicting where change will be needed and trying to head off catastrophe before it happens. My hope is that such forward thinking can create a world in which less reactive work is needed because fewer people are suffering.

My non-linear trajectory has been an asset in building a diverse skillset that I can now apply in a variety of different contexts. I am glad I didn't limit myself early on in my career. My advice to law students is to try not to put yourself in a box because you never know how life will move forward. For me, each opportunity I have taken—even when a bit of a leap from an established career path—has led me to another interesting opportunity. Outside of taking a clinic (or more than one!), I encourage students to have the courage to take jobs that appeal to their best self and not just the self that worries about retirement accounts and stability. In order to get my foot in the door at the ICC, I had to work a few months without pay, which led to a paid Trial Lawyer role. In my experience, the most competitive human rights jobs require a demonstration of commitment that usually involves an unpaid stint, but the knowledge gained is worth the saving and planning that may be required. My parents always taught me to live below my means and that mindset really helped me. Before my current job, I always worked for the government in expensive cities

like New York and San Francisco (with student loans), and I can tell you with certainty that it is possible. If you are really passionate about the work, you may need to take a lower salary or even a more junior role to get involved, but when making career choices, try to leave your ego out of it and focus on the big picture.

Above all, believe in your ability to make the world better, and let that guide you. A watched pot never boils. Often the same is true for careers, so don't be too committed to a certain idea of yourself or your professional trajectory. Aim instead to always be solving part of a problem you care about, and your career will take care of itself!