

LAW, ADVOCACY, RESILIENCE

For Maliat Chowdhury '25, the pursuit of justice is personal. Witnessing her family's political persecution in Bangladesh led her to California Western's MSW-JD program, where she has grown into a powerful advocate and ally for those who suffer from systemic injustice. As she prepares to graduate this spring, Maliat reflects on the experiences that brought her to CWSL, how the school has shaped her, and the path she hopes to carve in the legal world.



My interest in the law began when I visited Bangladesh at the age of 12. A vibrant nation nestled between India and Myanmar, Bangladesh was the country my parents had once called home. In their villages, I witnessed a whimsical lifestyle that felt both familiar and distinct from my upbringing in the United States. Children played alongside wandering chickens and cows, families shared meals by candlelight, and neighbors looked out for one another as dusk settled over the village. But I also saw challenges unfamiliar to my way of living: schools that many children couldn't attend, families rationing clean water, and the unspoken weight of economic hardship keeping generations tied to the land.

Yet, amid these struggles, I saw resilience. And that resilience is what first inspired me to pursue a path of service.

I was 18 when I saw the political realities that drove my parents to emigrate to the United States. In 2012, my uncle fled Bangladesh, fearing for his life after attempting to run against the incumbent prime minister. That same year, I watched as several members of my

extended family were sentenced to death for their political ideologies. Despite calls to investigate the tribunal's impropriety, my family's sentences stood. Faced with one of the highest forms of institutional corruption, I struggled to comprehend how such blatant injustice could exist—and how accountability for these human rights violations was virtually nonexistent.

From that moment, I became determined to learn what true justice meant. A fighting spirit arose within me, ready to combat injustice with the very same resilience that inspired me years before.

The year before I applied to law school, my grandfather's case lost its final appeal. This, along with mounting evidence of the tribunal's corruption, had left me disillusioned with the judicial system. In response, I turned my focus to more direct forms of service — like social work — to counter inequality from the ground up. Soon after entering the field, I discovered California Western's Masters of Social Work - Juris Doctor program, which was the perfect bridge between my passion for systemic change and my commitment to local justice.

In my five years at Cal Western, I've had my fair share of defining experiences and accomplishments. I've served as president of CWSL's International Law Society, as well as on the executive board of its International Law Journal. I've researched cutting-edge social justice issues with numerous professors, including Professor William Aceves, Professor Pooja Dadhania, and Professor James Cooper. I've also published two law review articles with their mentorship, having most recently completed my MSW thesis on vicarious resilience in asylum law.

I've also been supported by CWSL throughout a majority of my law school internships. During my 1L summer, the Career and Professional Development Office helped me secure a judicial externship with the Honorable Judge Anthony Battaglia '74. In my 2L year, I served as a clinical legal intern with CWSL's Innocence and Justice Clinic. And during my 3L summer, I was selected as a summer legal fellow at the San Diego County District Attorney's office, working in the East County Family Justice Unit under the supervision of Alfredo Asunción '15.

If I had to choose one experience that most symbolizes my growth at California Western, it would have to be my three years competing in CWSL's Competitive Advocacy Program (CAP).

Initially, I wasn't sure I would be cut out for CAP. Public speaking terrified me, and I was worried I would buckle under pressure. I'd also never been one for group projects. But now, I can't tell you how far I've come through the rigorous training and instrumental mentorship I've received in CAP. And I can't express how grateful I am for this life-changing experience — through it,



I've met and worked (at all hours of the night) with some of the most inspiring, hardworking, and thoughtful advocates, who are now lifelong friends.

From 2021 to 2024, I competed as an oralist on CWSL's Philip C. Jessup International Moot Court team. Jessup is the world's largest moot court competition, with over 650 schools competing globally. During my time on the team, we consistently placed among the top 32 competitors nationally, and our memorials continued to rank higher and higher each year. Under the guidance of Program Director Paul Parisi and the coaching of Professor Aceves, Professor Bobbie Thyfault '84, and Professor Kate Clark '10, our advocacy skills improved as our knowledge of international law deepened.

In my final year on the team, we achieved what I had long believed possible but wasn't sure could be accomplished during my tenure. Among nearly 1,400 briefs, our memorials placed first regionally and third and ninth internationally, earning us the prestigious Richard Baxter and Hardy C. Dillard Memorial Awards for excellence in legal writing and research.

Anyone who has participated in competitive advocacy knows that success is only possible through extraordinary teamwork. I'll never forget sacrificing my winter break for two grueling weeks of line-by-line editing with my team or collaborating in-depth with my opposing counsel, Sarah Becker '24, to understand where my arguments failed. And it wasn't just Sarah — everyone on the team, including Ariana D'Agostino '24,

Mariah Mantzke '24, and Alexander Gutterud '24, put aside days on end to untangle Jessup's complex issues. We challenged one another to refine our reasoning, sharpen our communication, and defend our claims. It was only through our dedication and camaraderie that we secured two international awards, three physical trophies, and five lifelong friendships.

I would be remiss if I didn't emphasize the importance of my mentors in CAP. Professors Thyfault, Clark, and Aceves gave me the confidence to conquer my fear of public speaking — the aspect of the legal profession that intimidated me the most. Professor Aceves, in particular, has been foundational in helping me shape my career path. Since my 1L year, I have learned from him in Civil Procedure and Constitutional Law, worked as his research assistant, and ultimately published a note in CWSL's *International Law Journal* under his supervision. His invaluable expertise as a human rights scholar also helped me navigate a sensitive critique of issues that could jeopardize my family abroad. He taught me how to make my voice heard in a way that still protects the ones I love. Through CAP and my mentors, I became convinced that international law is where my future lies.

After graduation, I am excited to officially begin my career by returning to the San Diego County District Attorney's office as a graduate law clerk. With the

added skills I've gained from my MSW, I feel well equipped to contribute holistic legal solutions to the San Diego community. I'm also mindful of what my identity as a Bangladeshi American woman in the justice system represents: a stepping stone in providing more inclusive and equitable justice. Looking ahead, I want to continue my multidisciplinary work and advocate for the implementation of therapeutic jurisprudence worldwide. My dream is to work with organizations that recognize mental health as a fundamental human right, pushing for policies that integrate psychological well-being into our justice systems.

My time at California Western has revitalized my passion — and hope — for the law. I have been fortunate to find a community of like-minded people who are zealous and relentless in their pursuit of a better world. While I continue to carry the weight of my family's story, I now do so with a renewed belief in the law's power to heal the wounds communities like mine have endured. Rather than seeing my background as a burden or score to settle, I recognize it as a lesson in resilience and justice — one I am committed to channeling into my work as a prosecutor. My goal is to ensure our legal systems not only combat corruption but protect and uplift the voices most affected by it so that their resilience, too, is rewarded with justice.

