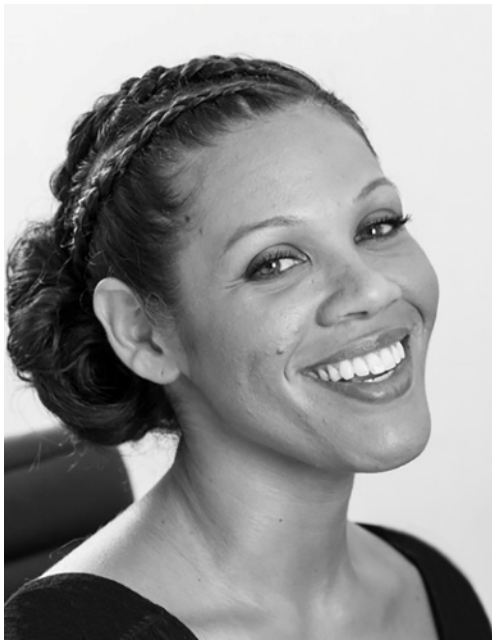


## Alumni Interview Jessica Rofé (2016–2017)

By: Morgan Miller



*Jessica Rofé is the Toni Rembe and Arthur Rock Immigrant Defense Fellow and Supervising Attorney of the NYU Immigrant Rights Clinic. Prior to joining Cleary, she was an Immigrant Justice Corps Fellow and staff attorney at Brooklyn Defender Services, and a NYC public school teacher for nearly five years. She is a 2014 graduate of NYU School of Law and was a Cleary associate in the New York office from 2016–2017.*

### **What practice area were you in while at Cleary?**

I was in the Latin America practice group. While there, I worked on M&A transactions and capital markets assignments. I also did substantial pro bono work on immigration-related issues, representing people facing deportation and in affirmative filings before immigration agencies.

### **What led you to the field of immigration law?**

My work sits at the intersection of criminal and immigration law, and is primarily focused on deportation defense and detention issues. I have always viewed this work as a racial justice issue. I work with predominantly Black, Latinx, and poor immigrants, who live in over-policed communities, and I see how our society's failure to confront historic inequities rooted in racism and classism affect immigrants' experiences here in the United States, whether they are new to this country or have lived here for decades. As a bi-racial, Black-American Sephardic Jew, issues of race, class, and belonging have been integral to my intellectual and political development. I began working in this field because I wanted to use legal tools to move the needle forward in advancing racial and economic justice, as we collectively vision toward a world where historic inequities don't manifest in systemic injustice.

### **What would you say is a typical day in your current position?**

I teach in the Immigrant Rights Clinic and supervise cases on our docket. We have both an individual client docket and a campaign docket through which we collaborate with organizations and coalitions in their advocacy to advance immigrant rights both locally and nationally. My days vary, but in any given week, I teach three seminar classes, meet with student teams about their cases and campaign work, prepare for and attend client meetings, review student work product, and prepare for cases that I carry on my own docket.

### **What types of campaigns have you worked on in your current position?**

Our campaigns really vary. This year, I'm supervising students who are supporting a campaign to bring

immigrant liaisons to NYC public high schools to improve access to school resources for students from immigrant and mixed-status families. I'm also supervising students who are supporting a campaign to elevate the stories of immigrant rights' activists who have been targeted for retaliation by federal agencies on the basis of their outspoken criticism of immigration law and policy. Since Covid-19, I've also begun collaborating with colleagues and community members to support a campaign to free everyone detained at Elizabeth Contract Detention Facility, a for-profit detention center in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Community members and advocates began calling for the release of all those detained at the jail in March 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic, due to the dangerous conditions in the jail. Those calls have only gotten stronger in the second wave, after reports that five people in the jail were confirmed positive for Covid-19. We filed class action litigation seeking the release of those detained in May 2020 to support the organizing efforts, and that litigation is ongoing.

### **What are some of your favorite parts of your current position?**

The most beautiful aspects of my work are the relationships we build with our clients, their families, and their communities. Our clients are pretty incredible, and we are so lucky that they're willing to share their stories and lives with us in the course of our representation. We're also very fortunate to collaborate on a myriad number of campaigns with local community partners who are visionaries in the movement for immigrant rights and racial and economic justice. And the students are great. They bring so much enthusiasm and creativity to the Clinic, which gives a cutting edge quality to our work.

### **What is one of the most inspiring organizations you have collaborated with?**

New York State Youth Leadership Council ("YLC"). The YLC is New York State's first undocumented youth-led organization. As a law student, I collaborated with the YLC to support their advocacy for state legislation to extend state-funded tuition assistance to undocumented students—nearly a decade later, they won. The NYS DREAM Act was passed in 2019. They're amazing. They support youth leadership, educational advancement,

grassroots organizing and self-expression—all to help youth create change in their communities. Last year, law students in the clinic collaborated with the YLC to draft a guide to graduate education for undocumented students, who look toward professional degrees but face barriers based on status. This year, we're supporting their campaign to expand resources to students from immigrant and mixed-status families in New York City secondary schools. I really admire their steadfast organizing, their dedication to the self-determination of undocumented people, and their public messaging about what a more just and equitable world can look like.

### **What skills did you learn at Cleary that you have used in subsequent jobs?**

Cleary taught me a lot. It was a really wonderful place for me to grow, and particularly to learn about working and communicating effectively in teams, and supporting one another's growth. When I started, I came into a corporate practice having worked at a public defender's office for two years, and I really knew very little about corporate practice. And the first team I worked with was incredible. It was led by Chantal Kordula and Manuel Silva, and they created a culture in which everyone carried a lot of responsibility, but received real-time, constructive feedback and felt supported. I will never forget that first experience because it taught me what good leadership and effective team dynamics look like in pursuit of a common cause on behalf of a client. I carry that with me. In the immigrant rights space, the work that I do is always collaborative, whether with clients, families and communities, students, or lawyers across organizations or practice areas. In that context, team dynamics, constructive and honest feedback, and pacing really matter. And Cleary sets such a good example of what that can and should look like.

### **What advice do you have for a young Cleary associate who may want to pursue a similar career path?**

I would suggest getting involved in Cleary's immigration pro bono practice. Jennifer Kroman and Kyle Dandeleit have created robust opportunities for Cleary attorneys to engage with immigration practice at every level, whether that be in immigration court or in the federal

district court in a habeas action, and that kind of experience is critical in transitioning to this work. The language courses also help!

**How has the pandemic shifted your current work?**

Covid-19 has shifted my work in a lot of ways. Many of our clients who are not detained have seen their cases stalled since the spring, which has created opportunities for some and new stressors for others. Detention issues have also become even more acute than they were before the pandemic. As a matter of Clinic praxis, we believe in a world without incarceration – but calls for release have become even more critical as jails have shown themselves woefully unequipped to address the virus. Our work has been to support those calls for release with whatever legal tools we can provide. Covid-19 has also changed the way we teach and engage with each other; much of what we do is on Zoom (though we do offer hybrid instruction) and heavily structured. I sometimes worry about how the absence of casual chit-chat and camaraderie affects community building, but I know this is not forever.

**How have you found ways to exercise self-care during Covid-19?**

I manage to go outside at least once a day and it's really helpful no matter how long it is. I have a baby (17 months) who also likes to go outside, so I have more of an incentive to make sure I get out every day—weather permitting.