

## Terry Bryant Law School Scholarship Essay

I was born in Russia, a country where justice doesn't exist. Most Russian people continue to live in blissful misery and ignorance, facing injustices—big or small—almost on a daily basis and rarely doing anything to fight them. They've been taught, through decades of relentless government persecution and fierce propaganda, that they have no control over their own lives, and that if they fight, they will face dire, often life-threatening consequences.

Despite being raised in this environment, I've never had what psychologists call “a learned helplessness.” Throughout my life, I was forced to stand up for myself—be it being bullied at school for my looks when I was a teen, or dealing with a professor who intentionally lowered my grades after I chose another discipline over his when I was a college student. I soon realized that not everybody has enough strength to defend themselves. Many people need support to have their voices heard.

That realization drew me to independent journalism. Independent journalists in Russia, contrary to the Western worldview, do far more than inform and educate the public on current events. Due to the government's failures, they also investigate crimes and actively advocate for people suffering from injustices to protect human rights.

One of the few media outlets that served this mission was Novaya Gazeta (NG), the most prominent Russian newspaper, whose editor-in-chief, Dmitry Muratov, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021. I started at NG in 2018 as a newsroom correspondent and, by 2020, was promoted to “special reporter,” the outlet's highest position. I specialized in immersive reporting and narrative writing focused on healthcare, charity, immigration, and human rights violations. More often than not, as a journalist, I achieved justice more effectively than lawyers.

One of my first reports after promotion is a testament to my belief that advocacy can make a significant impact to protect the vulnerable. I reported on children with orphan diseases who were denied treatment, even though the government was legally obligated to provide it. Patients' lawsuits had languished in courts for years with no favorable outcome. However, after a series of my articles sparked public outrage, the government was compelled to change federal law and fulfill its obligations to these children, at a cost of millions of dollars.

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During my five-year tenure at NG, I was repeatedly intimidated, threatened, surveilled, and sued by the government for speaking the truth. In 2021, I was beaten in the head until I bled by the police while covering a peaceful protest in Moscow. Officials later claimed that I had “no injuries” and refused to open a case against those responsible for the attack. That didn’t scare me; on the contrary, it strengthened my desire to fight for justice even harder.

The situation changed drastically in 2022 when Russia started the full-scale war in Ukraine. The government adopted a series of laws that criminalized independent journalism. Under these new laws, as part of the editorial office—which the government equated to an “organized criminal group”—I was facing up to 15 years in prison for exposing war crimes. After that, NG was forced to close, and I, along with most of my co-workers, fled Russia. I came to the United States seeking safety and refuge. I fought my case in court, and the judge granted me asylum, which allowed me to become a legal permanent resident and build a new, stable life without living in constant fear for myself and my family.

Throughout this process, I was represented by Carolina Antonini, an Atlanta-based immigration attorney. She was the first to show me the complexities and pitfalls of the American legal system. Her knowledge and experience inspired me to pivot from traditional journalism and take a closer look at law. Last year, I was hired as a paralegal at a firm run by attorney Rebeca Salmon, where I now work on cases involving minors who have suffered abuse or abandonment by their parents. My job—and this is where my journalism experience proves invaluable—is to carefully collect each piece of their story and support it with documentation.

Attending public court hearings and witnessing Ms. Salmon defend her clients fascinated me. I was inspired by the power of law and motivated to one day stand in her place: before a judge, protecting the rights of my clients—whether they are victims of domestic violence, people facing workplace discrimination, or immigrants like me, terrified of returning home and fighting for legal status and a better future.

This year, I applied to Georgia State University College of Law and was admitted to a part-time evening program. Receiving a scholarship from Terry Bryant would have a tremendous

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impact on both my educational path and long-term professional development. As an immigrant still rebuilding financial stability, the cost of law school presents a significant challenge for me. Although I am currently employed, I will need to transition to part-time work, which will substantially reduce my income while many financial responsibilities remain unchanged. Scholarship support would allow me to focus more fully on my legal education, which I plan to dedicate to protecting vulnerable communities.

I understand personally what it means to navigate American legal systems during moments of uncertainty. My experiences have shown me that access to justice is often determined not by the merits of a person's case, but by whether they have someone willing and able to advocate for them. I want to become the kind of attorney who provides that advocacy for people who might otherwise be overlooked.

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