The International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) is the international office of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that works to provide legislation, suggestions, and a forum for states to communicate and cooperate on child protection legislation internationally. This summer I spent ten weeks interning for the Koons Family Institute on International Law & Policy, the research arm of the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children. My duties as an intern, assigned to a country studies research project, were to compile reports on the child protection legislation for the ASEAN countries: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam. I conducted research on national laws and policies of these countries pertaining to children’s rights, missing children, child sex trafficking, online grooming, child pornography, and other forms of child exploitation, providing a basic overview of each country's government system, statistics on child exploitation in that country, and the particular challenges that the country faces in tackling these issues. Finally, I drafted a set of recommendations for each country to make advancements in their laws regarding child protection policies. These reports are currently being used by ICMEC’s representative office in Singapore in attempts to guide ICMEC's work in the region.

In short, the most important lesson I learned from this line of work is that we can still remain hopeful that people will soon cease to commit horrible crimes such as these that are perpetrated against some of the most vulnerable and marginalized members of our society. Because of their youth, inexperience, and lack of personal autonomy children are
not able to speak up for themselves in the way that adults are. I say we can remain hopeful because while most of these ASEAN countries have legislation drafted and most of them implement laws against these crimes, there still remain two very important issues with all of this: those countries that have no child protection laws and those that have those laws but do not necessarily enforce the laws. I believe that even more so than those countries that do not have the laws are those who simply choose to ignore their laws that we should be worried about.

From this internship I learned the workings of international cooperation and the difficulty of getting states with differing degrees of power and a state’s influence on another state, to come together and make convention-status decisions, to deciphering important documents that have the ability to alter a state’s way of governing, the way that people live, to things that I learned about myself. This internship taught me how to best manage my time, stay on track to complete tasks by the targeted finish time, maintain focus, and ultimately meet those goals that I set for myself. The structure of this internship was very independent and I was given the freedom to make the decision for myself as to when I was done with one project and when to move onto the next; deciding an appropriate format and best platform to present the information in a way that was professional enough for international leaders to implement into their countries’ laws; and even further decide whether the information I was giving them was needed or merely an insult to the state. My ten week internship at ICMEC gave me the life skills that I am now able to back up and provide evidence for rather than just voicing my abilities. As I reflect on
my time with ICMEC, though an amazing opportunity and great addition to my work experiences, I learned that I would rather not work in an office environment, rather a more hands-on line of work; affirming my career goals of becoming a dentist.

My understanding of child protection issues and the complexity in the different ways that certain Asian countries handle them definitely expanded throughout the internship. By the end of the internship, I had completed projects on five of the ASEAN countries and edited the two reports done by the previous semester’s intern; these seven were sent to the office in Singapore wherein the sole full-time employee can use these for recommendations and suggestions to governments in the region. Though the ASEAN region does, in general, acknowledge children’s’ rights and protections, this region suffers greatly from these crimes. These reports serve as the foundation for where each country is both lacking and succeeding with their laws and leaving more time to focus on how to succeed in regards to having the adequate number and caliber of child protection laws.

Ultimately, I aspire to be a general dentist who then employs victim survivors of sex trafficking giving them the skills to become dental assistants, hygienists, and dentists to then inherit the practice; with hope that they will have learned a trade to motivate them to continue on and better their lives, regardless of their past experiences with modern-slavery. While my career goals do not deal with children directly, my interests are in raising awareness and a broader knowledge of the nature of such crimes that threaten individuals’ autonomy and opportunity to living a life with basic human rights protections. I do not
limit my career goals to only working with children, but my work will be for those living in situations (past or present) of exploitative practices and living without the basic human right of personal freedom. In close, interning with ICMEC really helped me acknowledge my passion for serving the oppressed by way of activism, advocacy, and awareness while maintaining my aspiration to becoming a doctor of medical dentistry.