My name is Jon Steffy and I'm an Assistant Appellate Defender at the Office of the State Appellate Defender here in Chicago. I have been here for two years and it is a job that I enjoy very much. Criminal law is exciting and challenging, and provides a great sense of satisfaction that I am helping people every day.

I always knew I wanted to practice criminal defense, I suppose because I have always identified with the underdog and have been suspicious of authority since I was a kid. When you are practicing criminal law, you are dealing with real people and real consequences, something that I think gets somewhat lost in a lot of civil law practice. A person's freedom and the safety of the public are two of the most serious currencies that are exchanged in the battle between defendant and prosecutor. This makes even dull cases important, something which can keep you focused on a slow day.

Personally, I do not have a problem representing defendants. If you are an aspiring criminal defense attorney, this is something you will have to figure out for yourself. Everyone deserves a fair trial and is entitled to enjoy their rights to the fullest degree of protection. If the police are allowed to violate a defendant's right against an unreasonable search, or the judge doesn't admit proper evidence to aid in one's defense, that is a problem because it establishes precedent. Trust me, you want the rights of others vigilantly protected because one day, it is possible you or someone close to you will need to exercise those rights.

To those in law school interested in this field of law, I would recommend taking both criminal procedure classes, evidence, and trial advocacy. Take a class in civil rights, poverty or racial issues. Question policies of criminal law and legislation. Outside of school, as most criminal defense attorneys work for the government, especially those directly out of law school, it is key to secure an internship (which will almost certainly be unpaid, sorry) at an agency you are interested in. It can be city, county, state, or federal, and it does not matter if you are working to defend or prosecute. Just get as much experience in the field as possible. Talk to attorneys who practice in the field, see if they like their jobs and why. Tell them to tell you the truth- every job has a downside and it is important to know those before you apply to positions.

Personally, I worked at this office during my second summer and it was an invaluable way to see if I was truly interested in working here. Just to be sure I did not want to prosecute, I also worked a semester at the Illinois Attorney General's Office. I found this useful, as it confirmed that I wanted to be on the defense side of the aisle. My office looks for students and attorneys who have demonstrated a commitment to public service and an interest in criminal law. In appellate law, one's reading and writing skills are paramount, so one or two solid writing samples are an important part of your bag of tricks.