

Caitlin Russi

August 31, 2014

Dan Ruben, Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Building II – Suite 204
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I hope this correspondence finds you well. I am writing to reflect on my Summer Fellowship experience with Equal Justice America. As a rising 3L at the University of the District of Columbia David A. Clarke School of Law, I had the privilege of keeping the HIV/AIDS Legal Clinic open through the summer months. As the only student attorney working in the Clinic, I was responsible for all office administration as well as the substantive work for the Clinic's three open cases. Additionally, I observed and assisted an abuse and neglect case that was assigned to my supervising attorney. I will continue to observe and assist with this case under the Clinic's newly assigned supervising attorney.

The majority of my summer was spent working on one custody case in particular. My client, Ms. B., is a mother of three who works as an in-home pediatric nurse's assistant. Ms. B. and her ex-husband have one child together, a two and a half year old son, who is the minor child at issue in the custody proceeding. Ms. B. also has two children, twin 11 year old girls, from a previous relationship. Ms. B. is a survivor of domestic violence, and she finally decided to leave her abuser after he attacked her in their home and left her for dead in March of 2013.

When I began working on Ms. B.'s case, her custody case was trailing the criminal case stemming from the March 2013 attack, in which Mr. B was charged with simple assault. Mr. B. was physically and psychologically abusive throughout their relationship, and he would often use the children against Ms. B. The March 2013 attack was the catalyst for Ms. B.'s decision to leave her husband. She feared for her life and for the wellbeing of her children. For her safety, she relocated to an undisclosed location in Spotsylvania County, Virginia. As retribution for Ms. B.'s decision to leave, Mr. B. initiated divorce proceedings and requested full physical and legal custody of both their son and Ms. B.'s daughters (this matter was quickly dismissed for lack of standing). Before I joined the case, the divorce and property issues of the matter had been argued, but the custody matter was delayed because of the intrafamily offenses at issue in the criminal matter.

Mr. B. was found guilty of simple assault in June 2014, and was sentenced to 30 days incarceration, to be served on the weekends. Because of his criminal conviction and resulting sentence of weekend jail time, the bi-weekly weekend visitation schedule needed to be amended to a weekday schedule that worked for both parties. Mr. B. was able to use this opportunity to receive favorable changes to the visitation orders for himself. Two days after Mr. B.'s criminal conviction, he was awarded weekly visitations with exchanges occurring in DC. Together with my supervisor, I worked on three motions, two of which were emergency motions, to amend the initial revised visitation order. Because Ms. B. had to relocate out of the District for her safety, the revised orders requiring exchanges take place in DC were all incredibly burdensome for her.

It was astounding to me that the judge in the custody matter would be so deferential to a father who was just convicted of an intrafamily offense against the mother. Not only did we have to argue that the visitations were to occur bi-weekly, we also had to request multiple times that the exchanges occur in a safe location in Virginia about half way between the two parents' residences. The two emergency motions were granted; my most rewarding moment of the summer was calling Ms. B. and telling her that Mr. B.'s visitation rights were suspended until a favorable bi-weekly visitation schedule could be agreed upon or arranged by the court. Her shouts of relief touched me, and I knew the hours of work I put in were appreciated. We are still waiting to hear about the last motion, which again requested that all exchanges occur in Virginia.

I have developed a relationship with Ms. B. that I value both professionally and personally. She was my first Clinic client that required regular, sometimes daily, communication, and I have a greater appreciation and understanding of the investment made by a family attorney. When dealing with the weekday visitation issues, Ms. B. once asked me to pick up her son from the DC Supervised Visitation Center and stay with him until she was able to get to the District. I brought her son to get frozen yogurt, and I was able to spend time with the child that was at the crux of all of the law I worked on this summer. Ms. B. trusted me with her child personally as well as legally, and I felt inspired to work even harder on her case knowing I had that trust.

Throughout the summer, I have gotten to know Ms. B. and her children well. I know what motivates Ms. B. throughout these proceedings: the wellbeing of her children. Ms. B. is a kindhearted and motivated woman, and I am dedicated to her and her case. She deserves to have full physical and legal custody of her son, and she deserves to stay safe in her efforts to retain that custody. I have done much of the pre-trial work preparing for a custody hearing this summer, including drafting opening arguments and direct and cross examinations. However, the matter was pushed back and did not see a summer trial date. Because of my interest in this case and in helping Ms. B. achieve her legal goals, I am staying on the case to see it through to trial, currently scheduled for October.

I am grateful for my summer experience with Equal Justice America. Working for Ms. B. has been an incredibly rewarding experience, and it has reinforced my desire to pursue family law upon completion of law school. I am excited for the opportunity to see the case through beyond my summer commitment and to trial. Again, thank you for the opportunity to do this good work.

Sincerely,

Caitlin Russi

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University of the District of Columbia David A. Clarke School of Law
Class of 2015