

CHRISTINA GAMBINO

August 28, 2009

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

Re: Summer 2009 Fellowship

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I spent my summer working in the Custody and Support Assistance Clinic (CASAC) at Philadelphia Legal Assistance. CASAC clients are very low-income mothers, fathers, grandparents, or guardians who are seeking legal help regarding their children. The stakes are very high for these clients, the process and outcome very personal. Demand for help is very high: CASAC receives hundreds of calls every week via its hotline. Each client has a story to tell and many of them are heartbreaking or frustrating, and all are deeply personal. This demand is met by only four dedicated attorneys who, although committed and passionate about their work, cannot possibly offer legal representation to everyone who needs or wants it. That's where the interns and paralegals step in, returning calls and conducting client interviews to assess each situation and follow up with legal advice so the client can best represent themselves *pro se*. As a CASAC legal intern, that was my job.

When I arrived at the beginning of the summer, I and the three other interns, were given a list of 50+ current clients. Our task was to follow up with these clients, assess the current status of their case, advise further if necessary, draft Complaints or Motions if necessary, and report back to the supervising attorney. After a week of this introduction, we began interviewing new clients in person one-on-one. We talked to them about their situation, identified the legal issues, and briefed clients on what help we could provide and how they could best help themselves. Despite our full immersion into the process, we were never without the guidance and support of the CASAC attorneys who went over every case and question with us, helped us troubleshoot ideas, and reviewed our advice and pleadings drafts. By the end of the summer, I had over 100 clients who I routinely followed up with, drafted pleadings for, prepped for hearings, or sometimes just provided with assurance.

Each client's situation is so personal to them and the stakes so high that it is difficult not to feel personally caught up in the dramatic events I heard about every day. Many CASAC clients are survivors of domestic violence and other forms of abuse and it was the help I was able to provide to these clients, and to those in similar desperate situations, that was the highlight of my summer. I will never forget the pregnant woman who routinely had hot water thrown on her who found the courage to take legal action to protect herself and her unborn child. Or the woman who fled her abuser and was living in a homeless shelter with her four children and needed our advice to strengthen her to face her abuser in court over a custody battle. Or the man who was terrified he would never see his daughter again after her mother disappeared with her with no explanation or contact information. Or the woman who was continuously being harassed by the father of her children and just needed someone to listen to her story and advise her of her options. I feel privileged to have been someone to whom these clients could tell their stories and that I was able to work for an organization like CASAC which gives people what they are most looking for in these situations: knowledge that someone cares, hope that there is something to be done, and the information necessary to empower them to take action.

I am grateful for the opportunity to see how I can put my law degree to good use upon graduation and to see firsthand the difference that legal empowerment can make in someone's life. To know you have legal rights, to know you can be heard, to know you can stand up for yourself and your children to make your life better, and to know that there is an organization that is willing to help you along the way is an awesome thing, and I am so glad I got to be a part of it. Thank you for making it possible.

Sincerely,

Christina Gambino
Villanova University School of Law
Class of 2011