

August 3, 2009

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

RE: Summer 2009 Fellowship Experience

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I would like to first start out by saying thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to work in public interest. Without this fellowship I would have most certainly not have been able to do the work that I did over the summer. I am a better student for it. I will truly cherish the experience that I had and will take it with me in my future endeavors.

I worked for an organization called Bay Area Legal Aid. It is an organization that caters to low-income families throughout the California Bay Area. Although the organization is very large some branch offices specialize in certain areas. The branch office that I was located in worked with domestic violence survivors. The office provided a Domestic Violence Restraining Order Clinic that was open to the public throughout the week. At the clinic, volunteers and law clerks would assist domestic violence survivors to obtain temporary restraining orders (TRO) against their abusers. The office also provided full representation for those clients seeking assistance with Family Law issues such as divorce, child support, etc; and those seeking assistance with Immigration issues such as a change in status.

As a Law Clerk, I ran the clinic every Monday throughout the summer and returned TRO's twice a week. Along with volunteers I would assist people in filling out the proper forms for a TRO. This experience was very positive because it allowed me to come face to face with many different types of domestic violence. It really helped me gain a knowledge of really what domestic violence is and how best to advise applicants on how to deal with it. It also gave me an opportunity to learn how a restraining order works its way through the system. On many occasions, I sat in at the courthouse during my applicant's hearings. I saw how each judge approaches domestic violence issues and how these judges use the law to protect those in need. The people who came through the clinic were mostly women and usually monolingual Spanish. For most of these women they are undocumented, abused, and unable to navigate themselves through the legal system because of language barriers. Working with these women was very rewarding because on so many levels they needed help the most. I would sit with these women and they would tell me their story and I would translate it for them in English.

At times it was difficult, but when I returned the order and saw how relieved these women were that was enough to get me through. There was one case in particular that really affected me. I worked with a woman who had been verbally, physically, and sexually abused by her husband for many years. In addition, this woman was monolingual Spanish. This woman had finally worked up the courage to leave her husband but soon found that leaving him would lead to more problems. He continued to be abusive with her. By the time she had come to us,

the husband had not only began to be physically abuse her 7-year-old daughter but had also given the 4-year-old son herpes. I cannot deny that hearing this woman's story really affected me. I remember going home and just hearing this woman cry to me as she recanted the abuse and the horror of learning what had happened to her children. She had tried three times previously to get a Domestic Violence Restraining Order but was unsuccessful. Fortunately, after working with her and submitting her paperwork she was granted a DVRO for her and children. It felt really good to help her and although it upset me I knew that the work I did with her had really made a difference for her and her children.

As a Law Clerk I also had my own caseload. I worked with several women on applying for temporary status under the U-Visa application. This experience was perhaps the most rewarding because I truly feel now that working in Immigration can really change someone's life. The law does many things for people. Having legal knowledge empowers a person. But, with Immigration you can really change someone's situation. These women were all women that had been in abusive relationships for a very long time. These were women who did not even understand until after counseling that they had been abused. They had grown up in cultures that had desensitized them to this type of abusive behavior. They had been told that they were nothing and could be nothing.

I would meet with my clients often to work with them on their declarations, the most important part of their application. This part was the toughest because these women had to relive the most horrible experiences of their lives. It was tough sometimes to hear their stories but I knew I was doing good work. By the end of the summer I had submitted four U-Visa applications all of which have passed the first step in review so far. It was very rewarding to see that one woman in particular had really come a long way since beginning her journey. By the time I was submitting her application she was telling me how thankful she was for my help and that now she felt like she could be independent. That she could live her own life and provide for her son. Her telling me this made me feel really good. It made me feel like I really did something to help her and that is a good feeling to have.

Overall I would say that my experience was very positive and more than ever I want to work in Immigration. I learned so much from this experience and really appreciate how approachable each attorney was. I really felt like I learned a lot and had a lot of really good direction.

Sincerely,

Crystal A. Becerra
Santa Clara University School of Law
J.D. expected 2011