

August 31, 2012

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Mr. Ruben:

As an aspiring attorney, Legal Aid provided an excellent glimpse into the world of civil litigation and indigent advocacy. For fourteen weeks, I worked side by side with the attorneys that made careers of ensuring the law protects the poorest individuals in society. In all the experience was eye opening.

During my internship I worked on numerous cases, and the subject matter ranged from consumer protection disputes with creditors to obtaining social security benefits for clients. Almost every day was filled with excitement because I conducted client interviews, developed case theories, and represented clients before administrative bodies.

I worked on five consumer protection cases, but most of these cases are still pending. My consumer protection cases included garnishments, identity theft, and car repossessions. Additionally, these were some of the most complex cases I worked on because a variety of facts gave rise to these disputes. Unfortunately, these cases progressed very slowly because they required intense examination of contracts, payment records, and APR payment schedules. Another reason these cases progressed slowly was the Virginia Rules of Civil Procedure required specific steps to be taken before moving to the next phase of litigation. For example, in one case I was required to identify the next phase of litigation because over a year passed after a demurrer was filed. Similarly, I worked on a mortgage case where the dispute was resolved, but the debt collector was still harassing my client.

I also worked on three social security cases. For me these cases were my favorite because I enjoyed reading medical records, and making arguments based on this information. On the other hand, these arguments were the most difficult to compose because they primarily hinged on medical terminology and years of worsening conditions. In my first social security case, I summarized years of medical records. After reviewing this research, my supervisor persuasively argued that my client was incapable of engaging in substantial gainful activity. As a result, the Administrative Law Judge handed down a fully favorable decision, and awarded social security disability insurance benefits. In the second case, I researched whether an infant could receive social security insurance benefits even though the child was born out of wedlock after the biological father passed away. This case is still pending. My final social security case is also pending; however, I had the opportunity to draft the legal arguments that will be submitted to the Administrative Law Judge this September.

Surprisingly, I had the opportunity to work on an education case, and my client was a high school senior.

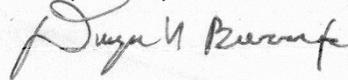
During the interview, the client and his mother sat across the table and described how my client's belongings were searched. Because a speck of grass was found and suspected to be marijuana, my client was suspended and his disciplinary record indicated that possession of illegal drugs was the reason for the suspension. After investigating the situation, I discovered these statements were inaccurate and needed to be corrected. Although a speck of grass was found in his gym bag, the school failed to conduct tests to verify that the substance was actually marijuana. This case was particularly unfortunate because the student wanted to enlist in the military, and this unsubstantiated infraction had the potential to undermine his entire career. Although this case is still pending, I drafted the final demand letter to the school requesting the change.

Additionally, I worked on multiple employment cases to ease the burden of unemployment for individuals that were between jobs. With employment cases, I represented clients before the Virginia Employment Commission. My representation allowed one client to receive unemployment benefits, and appeals are pending in my other cases.

Finally, I worked on housing cases. My most memorable case was an eviction case where I helped a client reach an agreement with her landlord to prevent eviction, despite the criminal activities of her son.

During the summer, I was exposed to numerous legal subjects. Although I learned about various substantive legal subjects, I learned the most about people. Last summer, all of my clients found themselves in desperate situations of some sort. While some faced eviction and others struggled to make ends meet, every situation demonstrated that they could lose their livelihood without the help of an attorney. This was the most moving aspect of my internship. Each time a client came in, I was immersed into their lives and became an advisor and counselor. Although all of my clients sought legal advice, sometimes they needed a person to listen to them. The most difficult aspect of my internship arose when I would accept a case knowing it would likely lose. I learned there was immense value in providing clients the dignity of representation in a society where money determines opportunities. Working with these clients gave me a greater appreciation for the work of legal aid attorneys. This experience enhanced my dedication to public interest because attorneys must protect individuals who are most easily forgotten by society.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dwayne U. Barrs Jr.", written in a cursive style.

Dwayne U. Barrs Jr.

William & Mary