

August 31, 2012

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Thanks to Equal Justice America, I was able to work in UDC's Community Development Law Clinic this summer. I worked with an affordable housing cooperative, a community garden, an apiary, and a community land trust. The experience was incredibly valuable for me because I was able to apply what I learned during my coursework to the real world. More importantly, it meant that the clinic was able to reach out to new clients and represent a greater number of community organizations and social entrepreneurs this summer.

The affordable housing cooperative was formed as a way to preserve community, ensuring that residents of the building, many of whom are immigrants from Central America, could afford to remain in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of D.C. Last summer, the cooperative discovered that the property manager had embezzled from them. The cooperative's board promptly filed a claim and won a judgment against the property manager. However, now they must address collateral issues related to embezzlement and the inevitably abrupt transition to a new property manager. The client contacted the clinic seeking assistance with several transactional matters. During the course of this work, we discovered that the cooperative owed back property taxes, and that there were liens on two of the units. Luckily, we discovered the problem. If not for our work this summer, it is not clear when the problem would have been discovered. It might have been much more difficult and more expensive to resolve.

Similarly, the community land trust was also created as a way to maintain affordable housing for residents of a Gulf Coast community devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The land trust is ready to build affordable housing and our clinic provided assistance researching financing and construction models.

Along with my work with the housing cooperative and the land trust, my responsibilities this summer also involved interviewing prospective clients working in sustainable urban agriculture and healthy food enterprise. The community garden was formed early this year, on a parcel of vacant land in one of the city's food desert areas. Nearby residents got involved in the cultivation of the orchard and individual and community shared plots as well as participating in social events at the site. The garden has plans to open a farmers market. The clinic has also agreed to assist the garden with 501(c)(3) status.

Thanks to changes to D.C. law, it is now feasible for beekeepers to cultivate and sell honey commercially. The clinic has agreed to assist an active beekeeper move into commercial apiculture. The clinic will assist with a limited liability corporation formation.

I am in law school because I see it as the best place to learn a new skill set to build on my work for social justice, labor rights and sustainable solutions. I want to practice community development law when I graduate, particularly in relation to healthy food access and sustainable economic development in food deserts. The fellowship afforded me a more precise understanding of the role of a lawyer, and a more concrete understanding of the ways in which a lawyer can advance equitable development strategies.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to do this work over the summer. Please let me know if you have any questions. It is gratifying to know that Equal Justice America will continue to provide public interest fellowships to law students across the country. Please do not hesitate to contact me if there is anything I can do to support the program.

With sincere thanks,

Emily Citkowski
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