

August 8, 2012

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

Re: *Summer Fellowship Evaluation*

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am writing to express my appreciation to Equal Justice America for funding my work this summer at the Texas Foster Youth Justice Project. The Justice Project is very unique because it provides pro bono legal services solely to youth who are in foster care or have aged out of foster care. The legal issues I dealt with varied greatly from case to case; thus, I was introduced to a wide range of practice areas – something I don't believe I would have been able to experience at a different internship. Also, because the project is very small, I was able to be deeply involved in cases and interact with clients on a daily basis. The youth I had the privilege of working with were very smart, savvy, and respectful; I was truly impressed with their resilience, given their difficult upbringings.

Some of the issues I dealt with included helping youth obtain their tuition waivers so they could attend college for free, completing applications for citizenship or legal permanent residency, and working with youth to obtain identification documents so they could get jobs. I also performed legal research on several important issues. For example, several attorneys at my organization observed that some county clerks refused to provide free certified copies of final court orders to individuals who had filed affidavits of indigency. I wrote a memo describing the problem and analyzing relevant case law and statutes. Another example dealt with the observation that some school districts refused to enroll students who did not have parents or legal guardians living in the county where the school was located. This overly strict policy meant that if a child fled her home due to abuse, and the legal guardianship issue was not immediately resolved, the child would be unable to attend school at all. In both cases, the research I performed was incorporated into letters sent to the problematic agencies in an effort to advocate for our clients.

I was also given the responsibility of updating resources made available by the project. I assisted with editing and printing the third edition of the Aging Out Guide – a nearly 100 page booklet that describes foster youths' rights and responsibilities as they become independent. These guides are distributed state-wide and they are constantly in demand and praised for their usefulness. I also drafted guides on issues such as how to obtain a driver's license, how old you have to be to take the G.E.D., and the eligibility requirements for sealing juvenile criminal records.

Over the course of the summer, my supervisor gave me many opportunities to learn more about the child welfare system in Texas. I was able to attend court hearings in many different counties and see how certain courts handle their cases better than others, and how the judges' actions affect the children in the state's custody. I was able to meet many people who worked in the system – from judges, to caseworkers, to attorney ad litem. The more I learned about the system, the more I became sure that I want to continue to work in the field of child welfare law.

There were several youth I worked with whose stories further cemented my commitment. One in particular was a young woman who the project was attempting to help obtain legal permanent resident status. She had been brought to the United States by her physically and sexually abusive boyfriend when she was thirteen years old. The Department of Family and Protective Services took her into custody when she was fourteen and she quickly learned English, excelled in school, and thrived in foster care. Unfortunately, despite repeated assurances to the contrary, the Department never successfully filed for her to obtain legal permanent residency as a Special Immigrant Juvenile. She is now too old to take advantage of SIJS. Due to this error, she has languished for years, unable to work or go to school despite her great desire to do both. I performed legal research on several aspects of her case and drafted a detailed letter to the Department asking them to certify her for a U visa as an alternative path to legal residency. I also worked closely with her to make sure that she understood the process and that she was getting the services she needed to survive. I think that she appreciated having someone take her legal issues seriously, and fight for her rather than ignore her. I have no idea how her story will end, but I plan to continue working on her case in the hope that we can succeed in giving her the ability to create a successful life.

My experience with the Texas Foster Youth Justice Project was invaluable for many reasons. Working in a legal aid office was both exciting and educational. Further, working with my supervisor, Mary Christine Reed, was truly a privilege. It was very inspiring to see how much she cared for the youth we worked with and to see the lengths she would go through to ensure that justice was served. I have no doubt that the work done by the project changes lives for good, and the experience has further strengthened my dedication to working in public interest law.

Thank you again for funding my summer internship.

Sincerely,

Sarah Bryant



LAW OFFICE OF  
TEXAS FOSTER YOUTH JUSTICE PROJECT

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July 31, 2012

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
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Midlothian, VA 23112

RE: Sarah Bryant Law Clerk Fellowship

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Sarah Bryant worked as a law clerk for Texas RioGrande Legal Aid Inc.'s Texas Foster Youth Justice Project this summer for 10 weeks. She did outstanding work and made a major contribution to many clients' cases as well as the general resources our project makes available to current and aged out foster youth and those who work with foster youth.

Sarah performed a variety of assignments; a major strength was that she was more than willing to take on whatever issue or task arose and do what was necessary and more. It can be difficult to predict what legal issues or problems youth will seek assistance for and I could not offer no guarantees regarding specific types of legal work to be done during her clerkship.

Sarah is tremendously organized and resourceful. It was easy to rely on her to take care of matters, consult with me when guidance was necessary, to respond appropriately to client queries, to demonstrate tremendous initiative in her work and to produce a high quality work product. No matter what issue or legal matter came up, Sarah was interested in providing assistance. Because she was so capable, the efficiency of our project went up tremendously. This was especially helpful as we received a number of complex cases shortly after her arrival involving foster youth who were graduating with complex immigration or identification document issues. Our project would have been overwhelmed by these requests for assistance if it were not for the work Sarah performed. This was especially helpful because our cases were coming from non-traditional referral sources, high school counselors, who had been referred to us by staff from Child Protective Services. If we had not been able to assist the youth in a timely manner, we would have lost considerable credibility with a network of agencies and resources.

Some of the projects Sarah worked on included:

- 1) Completing updates and revisions to our highly popular publication *A Guide to "Aging Out" of Foster Care in Texas* guiding the project from the design artist to the printer;
- 2) Assisting several clients with complex citizenship/immigration issues – performing detailed research, extensive form preparation, and careful, detailed development of

necessary supporting documentation;

- 3) Research on a wide variety of legal matters including extended foster care, school enrollment issues, enforcement of monetary judgments, sovereign immunity, malpractice, access to the courts of indigent litigants and more;
- 4) Preparation of court pleadings and discovery in a variety of matters;
- 5) Assisting foster youth in accessing post-foster care services and benefits;
- 6) Extensive youth client interviewing and interaction – which can require much patience and follow-up;
- 7) Development of web page resources related to common foster youth legal issues; and
- 8) Outreach at foster youth events and attendance at meetings and court proceedings concerning foster youth.

I've worked with many law clerks in my 19 years as an attorney and Sarah stands out as one of the best. Due to the special needs of the foster youth community and the detailed case work that comes with most of our cases, I am selective about law clerks, and would rather forgo having a clerk than have one who does not work well with youth or cannot handle the large variety of tasks that come up in our case work and work with sufficient independence. Sarah came highly recommended to me and I was not disappointed. She made a tremendous contribution to the work of our project and our clients during her ten weeks and I feel very fortunate to have had her for a clerk.

Thank you for funding Sarah; I can assure you the money was well spent. I also know that no matter where Sarah's legal career takes her, she will take with her knowledge and understanding from her experiences this summer of the impact that the legal system can have on abused and neglected youth as they transition to adulthood.

Sincerely,

TEXAS FOSTER YOUTH JUSTICE PROJECT



Mary Christine Reed  
Attorney at Law