

August 31, 2016

Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 204
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Last year I ended up clerking in the Housing Department at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) in Austin, Texas, somewhat by chance – after I discovered late in the school year that another clerkship I had arranged did not meet summer funding requirements. A clinical professor at UT Austin’s School of Law recommended TRLA, where I might work with an attorney she had clerked with under Judge William Wayne Justice years before.

On my first day at TRLA in 2015, my new supervisor told me about a client who had just received an eviction notice. He asked if I wanted to call her and find out the story, and though my mind said, “No, I’m not ready!” my mouth said, “Uhh, sure.” So I interviewed my first client, reconvened with my supervisor, and then called the client back to ask her everything I had forgotten to ask her during the first call.

In this way, TRLA served as a sort of trial by fire. I did not merely observe attorneys and their clients from a chair in the corner. I learned to talk to clients and to participate meaningfully in the department’s weekly case review meetings, in which attorneys and paralegals gathered to discuss possible approaches to complicated cases.

My first clerkship with TRLA quickly became my favorite job ever (and I had had many jobs since I first started working as a housekeeper when I was thirteen years old, seventeen years before this TRLA clerkship!). So of course I was eager to re-join the team as a law clerk this summer. My former supervisor was supervising another clerk, and I was eager to learn about different approaches to the job, so I went to work with Kelli Howard in the office next door. Kelli and I bonded over our similar maladies (we both have asthma, hearing loss, and problematic knees) and our shared desire to be of service to the disenfranchised. I found her to be an enduringly supportive supervisor and possibly the nicest person I have ever known.

Under Kelli and the department’s other attorneys, I worked on preparing pre-trial documents and drafting letters to clients and to the opposition. Perhaps the bulk of the work I did this summer, though, involved meetings and telephone calls with clients and with oft-disgruntled landlords and property managers. These conversations confirmed for me that listening is as important as talking, and compromise is key to success. In fact, I believe the most important thing I observed at TRLA is that sometimes the attorney who gets on the phone with the opposition and asks, “How can we resolve this?” has as much success as the attorney with the arsenal of housing statutes and legal precedents. Effective lawyering ultimately requires a combination of legal education and communication skills. For instance, during one phone call to a property

manager on behalf of a client who was facing eviction because she had gotten behind on her rent (after her daughter had been killed in a domestic violence dispute and she had had a stroke), the property manager told me that she had wanted someone to reach out and negotiate for the client. The eviction notice had served primarily to get the client's attention. Ultimately, the property manager and I arranged that the client would pay her outstanding bill, the property manager would dismiss the eviction, and then the client could decide whether to leave the property or to move into a unit that better fit her special needs.

The lawyering in TRLA's Housing Department is phenomenal – the department head is nationally renowned as an expert in low-income housing – and the department has been the perfect place for me to learn how to talk to clients, to assess the opposition's position, and to laugh at the frustrating aspects of the judicial system. I am ever grateful to have been part of the team, and I am grateful to Equal Justice America for funding my work with TRLA.

Thank you,

Skyler Collins
University of Texas