

November 18, 2015

Dan Ruben
Founder/Executive Director
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Mr. Ruben,

This summer, I worked at the Legal Aid Justice Center in Richmond, Virginia. I was one of six legal interns and I enjoyed every minute of my time. I began by attending a two-day training in Charlottesville that was put on jointly by both the Legal Aid Justice Center (“LAJC”) and the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society. The training was beneficial in that the attorneys introduced the interns to some pertinent issues in the law, explained the differences between the two organizations, and allowed the interns to meet one another.

I soon volunteered for a Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJ) case with former LAJC attorney Nicole Dooley and fellow intern, Chris Peña. SIJ cases are tackled in two parts. First, one must petition a state family court to issue findings that indicate that the child has been abandoned, abused, or neglected by at least one parent and that the child would be better off in the states. The next step is to ask the federal immigration court to drop removal proceedings against the child so that he or she may embark on the path to legal citizenship. Our first task was to conduct a follow-up interview with the mother of the child who was seeking legal status. Nicole had conducted the initial interview. The clients were from Honduras and although the case seemed simple enough at first, it turned out to be much more complicated. The mother had apparently come to the United States over ten years ago and she had two other children who had been born in the states. She was deported the year before she came to see Legal Aid. She was then involved in a DUI, though it seemed clear she was not a regular drinker and was, in fact, a good mother. She was placed in deportation proceedings again only because she accidentally drove into the NASA headquarters in Maryland, after visiting one of her other children. Our other client, her son, was a very mature twelve-year-old child who had been performing at the third-grade level in school for lack of access to technology and the arts. Once he started attending school in Virginia, however, he began performing at the sixth-grade level in a matter of months. He even drew me a picture to express his gratitude! That was probably my favorite part of the summer. When I left Legal Aid, the case was still ongoing. It is my hope to check in after final exams and help in any way I can.

Towards the end of the summer, I was able to actually represent a student before the Richmond City Public School Board (RCPSB) for an expulsion hearing. The student was stopped from entering her public high school because she was allegedly violating the dress code by wearing ripped jeans. She tried to enter school anyway so as not to miss class—she was an honor roll student, despite having a learning disability, and the captain of her basketball team. In fact, her coach even wrote a letter of support for case. Our client had big dreams of attending a four-year university but the issue was that the school did not wish for her return, and both she

and her mother did not want her to return to her school. The RCPSB allowed her to transfer to the school of her choice (a very rare discretionary move) and were impressed by her record and her mother's commitment to her child's education. Though I have been trained in oral argument and presentation through William & Mary's Legal Practice Program and Alternative Dispute Resolution team (ADR), there is simply no preparing for the real thing. I was shaking and nervously managed to get through a summary of our client's stellar scholastic record before petitioning for her reentry into the school district so as not to disrupt her educational track so close to college. She was a rising junior and is now enrolled in a school better suited to her needs.

I feel extremely lucky to have received the EJA Fellowship to allow me to work on such important issues in the Richmond community such as immigration and educational justice.

Sincerely,
Krishna Jani
William & Mary Law School
Class of 2017