



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



Name: Alondra Gonzalez

Law School: Loyola Law School

Organization: Kids in Need of Defense

Update 1: I am honored to be an Equal Justice America fellow. As a non-profit, Equal Justice America sponsors law students in their pursuit of public interest work. It is inspiring to see how Equal Justice America dedicates themselves in ensuring those who are low-income in our society still receive access to legal assistance.

This summer Equal Justice America will sponsor my internship at Kids in Need of Defense (KIND). KIND is a non-profit organization founded by the Microsoft Corporation and Angelina Jolie to ensure all unaccompanied minors who are migrating receive legal assistance.

Walking into the office on my first day it was comforting to see the monarch butterfly decorate the nameplate at KIND. The monarch butterfly has become a symbol for the rights of immigrants, and it was heartwarming to see an office that visibly makes their stance known from the start.

I was lucky to take intro to immigration course at Loyola Law School with the professor who runs the school's immigration clinic. The course taught me the different forms of relief available to immigrants. Therefore starting at KIND I was excited to see that what I learned in school is no longer just for the purpose of passing a class but also for the purpose of assisting and protecting those most vulnerable.

I am loving the environment and goals KIND so clearly has fostered to make a difference in the world and hopeful this summer will be filled with amazing opportunities.

Update 2: I have been an intern at Kids in Need of Defense for nearly a month now and I have learned so much. KIND is a non-profit organization that provides pro-bono legal services to unaccompanied minors who cross the border. The staff at KIND are all very welcoming and encourage us to ask questions. I love that they include us in their Teams chats where the attorneys ask each other advice and share problems that they are facing in their current cases as it reveals how attorneys are always learning.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

My supervising attorney has really encouraged me to get real hand experience in interacting with clients and learning how to best advocate for them, which can look different in this field as most of our clients are minors. Recently I conducted an intake with a prospective client. Even though I have experienced conducting interviews this would be the first time I would take an intake of a minor completely in Spanish. Hearing the child's story of working since he was 10 years old and how he came to the U.S. to provide and take care of his parents reminded me how vulnerable these children are and how it is so important to advocate for them.

Moreover, I have been able to go to court with my supervising attorney in order to get a finding of the minor being eligible for special immigration juvenile status. It was very interesting to see a court proceeding and the protocol that happens between the judge, the attorney, the clients and the interpreter. Overall, it was surprising to see that these hearings are very quick as generally the judge does not ask the clients any questions. My supervising attorney explained generally they do not ask questions because the judge has already read the declarations and has already made up their mind that the child does qualify for a special immigration juvenile status finding. I have recently been assigned a big research assignment regarding asylum and cannot wait to continue to learn more about this form of relief.

Update 3: As I continue my journey interning at KIND I cannot help but think how much I have learned over the course of the summer. I realized this when I spoke to a friend of mine who is thinking of going into law school as I explained to her some of the law regarding Special Immigration Juvenile Status and some of the law regarding Asylum. This conversation with my friend reminded me that the knowledge I have acquired in law school and in this internship is so important to be shared used to help people in the community who do not have the resources or access to this information. It made me really glad to be part of an organization that does a lot in terms of community outreach.

Moreover, this past week my supervising attorney gave me a big research project that has me researching several possible arguments to make a successful asylum claim for a client who witnessed their family be extorted and threatened by gangs in their home country. Part of the research requires me to look for favorable cases in other circuits outside the 9th circuit. Therefore, this research assignment has been eye opening to see how in one circuit a case with the same facts might succeed but that same case might very well fail in another circuit. It is shocking sometimes to see how judges are able to accept certain legal arguments as sufficient, but others are able to justify that for some small reason that same argument is insufficient. Looking outside of the law as I read case after case of people's lives being completely changed for the worse or for the better, I cannot help but think of our client's lives being controlled by a set of laws that are incredibly unclear.

Therefore, I was very impressed and thankful that KIND allowed us to meet a worker, who was previously an attorney, and who is now in charge of furthering pro-immigration legislation on the west coast. I have never truly considered going into policy work, but I am not realizing how important this type of work is and I am so grateful that this internship is giving me a way to explore this type of work.

Update 4: It will be my last week at KIND very soon and as I reflect on my 10 weeks working with KIND I feel very lucky to have been given the opportunity to work for a non-profit versus private practice. Although I have



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

two years of experience working at a private employment law firm, I cannot imagine how different a private immigration law firm would feel like. This was made clear to me when KIND organized a panel for us where KIND attorneys told us about their previous work experience and how they got to KIND. The creation of this panel is another sign of how much KIND is striving to foster our growth as future attorney. In the panel several attorneys described their experience working in private firms that specialize in immigration and how different it was to working at KIND. From my own experience working at KIND I can see clearly how different it is to work in an environment whose main priority is only to assist those that are vulnerable and not have to worry about also running a business.

Moreover, I also cannot help to reflect on how lucky I also am to be able to work on an withholding for removal case and be able to see the conclusion for that case as well. For this particular case the client was not eligible for asylum due to having a complicated past with the law. When I was assigned to assist in this case the attorney let me know this has been his most challenging and complicated case he has had. The client himself was in detention and out of concern for his mental health both the client and the attorney agree to have his hearing be sped up despite this potentially hurting the client's case as it gives the attorney less time to gather evidence and do research.

Therefore, many attorneys, paralegals and interns were assisting with this case as the attorney, being an amazing advocate, was going to make every possible argument he can make in order to get the client out of detention and get his withholding of removal granted. I worked specifically in researching one of those arguments which was that due to the client's mental health condition the client's life would be in danger if he were to return to his home country as well as research the conditions of street youth in Honduras and how they are persecuted by the state. It was an amazing feeling to see the message from the attorney telling the whole KIND team that the clients's withholding was approved. The whole KIND office celebrated this win and it was also nice to see how the office thanked and acknowledged everyone who helped on the case.

Update 5: It has been about a week since I have finished interning at KIND, and the first thing I can say is that I miss it a lot. I got very close to my fellow interns and loved all the staff who were all very welcoming. I am realizing now that the environment built at a workspace is very important and at KIND the environment that they created in the office was one that focused heavily on accepting diversity, advocating for clients, but also taking care of one's mental and physical health. I got to witness first-hand how emotionally heavy it can be working on these types of immigration cases, and it becomes even more difficult to listen and read the traumatic events that are happening to immigrant kids. Therefore KIND, being very aware that burnout is always a very real obstacle immigration attorneys can experience, have created an environment that integrates taking care of oneself and also of each other. I notice that on the teams calendar there are every so often events that the office puts on for everyone at the office like painting, celebrating birthdays, and even a Mario kart tournament. KIND also has wellness Fridays every other week. The environment at KIND was one that I will not forget and always



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

keep in mind as it is important to also make sure that we as advocates can have a long career by also finding time to experience joy and to care for ourselves as well.

Another major lesson that I have taken from working at KIND is how important research is and how important keeping up to date with all new immigration law, new court procedures, and new administrative rules when it comes to USCIS. For humanitarian relief, if one is lucky if they will only have to deal with USCIS and while that is preferable than dealing with the Department of Homeland Security and Immigration Court it can still be a bureaucratic and administrative nightmare since if one small mistake is made means the timeline of everything gets pushed back. Therefore, it was also nice to see how KIND partners up with other non-profit organizations that focus on Special Immigration Juvenile Status (SIJS) to host a conference centered on any new problems or new insights that attorneys have faced when it comes to SIJS. It was amazing to see this whole community address some of the similar problems they have faced and to have others in the community suggest solutions as well as suggest moving to advocate for new legislation that would also help solve those problems.

My goal for my first summer as a law student was to work for a non-profit that did immigration work and I feel like I hit the jack pot by working at KIND. I have learned so much and it has shown me how important it is for places like KIND to exist as they are doing so much for a highly vulnerable and underrepresented community.