

November 4, 2010

Mr. Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

Re: Summer 2010 Fellowship

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I received a summer fellowship to work in Weslaco, TX with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA). My goal for the summer was to explore my interests in rural poverty issues and the EJA grant provided me the opportunity to do just that.

The RioGrande Valley, the main focus of much of TRLA's work, is an isolated place, with very poor people and very few services. According to recent TRLA statistics, there are 19,000 qualifying clients for legal aid for every one lawyer working down there. The need is shocking, and I witnessed this need first-hand over the summer. The town where I was located, Weslaco, is small and nestled along the Mexico-United States border. Many of the clients we served are residents of Weslaco and the surrounding towns, and they faced the spectrum of legal issues, including immigration, housing and employment discrimination.

I worked on a variety of cases during the 12 weeks that I interned with TRLA. I assisted our Employment Discrimination attorney on two cases: one involving unpaid overtime compensation and the other involving a retaliation claim under the Family Code. The latter case required a lot of investigation and I interviewed the client and witnesses multiple times. I did not see a resolution to the case before my time ended, but I was able to pass along my work to the staff attorney. I also worked with the housing lawyers on an unlawful eviction claim and the adoption attorney on a re-instatement claim. The most exciting project, however, was working with the Executive Director and others on a cert petition to the Supreme Court in a lawsuit against FEMA for housing damaged experienced by tens of thousands of poor people after Hurricane Dolly. We submitted the petition and are still waiting to hear the outcome.

The approach to lawyering that I am drawn to is the community lawyering model – the lawyer lives among the community and is able to address the various legal needs that arise for individuals within the community. With that in mind, I also intentionally embraced the rural, small-town lifestyle of Weslaco. I fished and played bingo with people in my community, and I even purchased some farm animals to raise over the summer, seeking advice from the locals along the way. By the end of the summer, people at the neighborhood diner would ask me a legal question and I was able to refer them to TRLA for services.

My summer with TRLA was perfect. It only enhanced my commitment to work with the rural poor.

Thank you for making this experience possible for me.

Truly,

Amy R. Smith
American University