

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

October 4, 2009

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This letter summarizes my deeply rewarding fellowship experience during the summer of 2009. I worked at the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago (LAF), an organization that helped my family gain political asylum when I was a child. Returning to the same organization that helped my family almost twenty years ago was emotionally powerful for me. The fellowship experience brought me back full circle. This time, however, I was charged with the responsibility of contributing back to LAF and to its clients. I expected that the highlights of my summer would come from working with immigrant families, but the highlights came from helping a client escape homelessness.

My first project, one that lasted the duration of my summer, involved an elderly woman, Ms. Brackenridge, struggling with homelessness for nearly three years. She had been rejected from housing programs numerous times because of two outstanding judgments with previous landlords. Without the satisfaction and release of those judgments, the Chicago Housing Authority refused to reinstate Ms. Brackenridge into its elderly housing program. Her previous landlords appeared inflexible; they demanded the full amount of backdated rent with no exceptions. Rather than resign herself to a destined fate, she finally decided to contact our organization.

The solution to Ms. Brackenridge's problem was one of communication, negotiation, and diligence rather than one of substance. Altogether there were five interested parties. None of the parties spoke to each other, much less to Ms. Brackenridge. Generally stated, each party was skeptical. After speaking or meeting with all the interested parties directly, we were able to reach a common ground: Ms. Brackenridge would pay half of the amount due, the landlords would sign a satisfaction letter, and the Chicago Housing Authority would reinstate her into its housing program.

In order to pay half the amounts due, Ms. Brackenridge and I fundraised from local organizations. We called local charity organizations together. I introduced us, explained our situation, and remained on the phone while Ms. Brackenridge made her impassioned pitch for relief. We repeated this process with multiple organizations. Finally, an organization decided to help us. They fronted the money to Ms. Brackenridge. After gathering the necessary funds, I helped negotiate a settlement with the two landlords, taking bus rides across the city to pay the judgments and obtain signed satisfaction letters. In turn, I delivered the satisfaction letters to the Chicago Housing Authority, which then reinstated Ms. Brackenridge into its housing program.

This project took an entire summer to complete. Juggling the interests of charitable organizations, private landlords, the Chicago Housing Authority, and the client was both difficult and delicate. Any of those parties could have halted the process, relegating Ms. Brackenridge back to the precariousness of her homelessness.

Ms. Brackenridge's story had an impact on me for several reasons. First, Ms. Brackenridge's situation exposed the dark existence of homelessness—its precarious nature, its humiliating connotation, and its psychological destructiveness. She dealt with these issues with a unique dignity, but after three years of combating homelessness, she was emotionally worn. Watching her escape that reality was uplifting.

Second, it helped me understand how a lawyer can disentangle many conflicting interests to reach a common solution. At first glance, it seemed that the interests of the private landlords and the Chicago Housing Authority were in direct conflict, but after closer examination it appeared that most of the involved parties were willing to compromise to reach a favorable conclusion for our client.

Third, it helped me realize that escaping homelessness also meant confronting structural institutional obstacles. Much too often, I thought about homelessness as a reflection of a person's choices in life: failure to pay bills, failure to secure employment, etc. But, Ms. Brackenridge's situation also illuminated the structural difficulties: the bureaucratic obstacles, the legal challenges, the private landlord interests, connecting the charitable organization to a worthy recipient, etc. The difficulty of regaining one's abode was much too difficult—even for a tenacious person like Ms. Brackenridge. Homelessness no longer had to do with personal choice necessarily, but with the inertia of *other* interested parties and institutions.

In sum, returning full circle to the organization that helped me as a child had a profound impact on me. Ms. Brackenridge had such an impact on me because my story was immersed in hers. We shared a common path, confronting issues together. I felt compelled to give forth all my talent and energy in her service. After all, that's what an attorney did for me twenty years ago. In keeping with that spirit, I will always be tied to legal aid services to the poor—both because of my background and because of my valuable fellowship experience, which gave me the privilege of meeting wonderful people like Ms. Brackenridge.

Sincerely,

Andrés Cerritos
J.D. Candidate, 2010
University of Wisconsin Law School