

Thursday, August 18, 2016

Dan Ruben, Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This past summer, between my first and second year at Columbia Law School, I worked for the Family Defense Practice at The Bronx Defenders in the Bronx, NY. The Bronx Defenders is the assigned counsel for indigent parents in their defense against neglect and abuse petitions brought by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS).

My brief exposure to the Bronx Family Court system and processes quickly gave me the feeling that our clients were presumed guilty by the court. The Bronx Defenders must zealously advocate, tooth and nail, for their clients' respect and parental rights. Almost all of the cases I worked on were pre-disposition; meaning there had not been a finding of neglect against our client yet the court still recommended myriad services for our clients to submit to. These services included anger management classes, mental health therapy, parenting classes and drug testing among others. Prior to a finding of neglect parents cannot be compelled to comply with the services yet they did. They did so even when these services conflicted with their busy work schedule or when they didn't need anger management or drug testing. They did so because they were willing to go through any steps the court recommended if it meant having their children returned to their custody as soon as possible.

During my internship I was able to assist my attorneys with trial preparation by compiling Discovery Digests from the evidence provided by ACS and by researching different legal issues for my supervisors. I also drafted subpoenas for witness testimony and records that would help clients' defense. I was also able to go to one of our client's home on two occasions to conduct interviews in preparation for an administrative hearing. The hearing was to argue that the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) should seal our client's central registry record so she could continue working as a babysitter.

Prior to coming to law school I had personal as well as professional experience with family law and child custody issues. It was insightful for me to see family law in a legal environment. I was glad to be able to help our clients navigate the demeaning family court process in their attempt to keep the state from taking their children or in their attempt to have their children returned to their custody.

Sincerely,

J. Antonio Carrera
Columbia Law School, Class of 2018