

August 31, 2013

Re: Equal Justice America Summer Fellowship 2013

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am a second-year law student at Cornell University. I am very grateful for having been selected as an Equal Justice America Fellow for the summer of 2013. The support that this fellowship provided enabled me to pursue an opportunity in the non-profit legal sector this summer, as well as to further develop my legal skills in the public interest sphere. I have a long-standing interest in advocating for people from traditionally marginalized backgrounds, so the Legal Aid Society's dedication to providing legal representation for disadvantaged individuals strongly appealed to me. Working as a legal intern for the Family Law practice of the Legal Aid Society of New York was a greatly fulfilling experience. The internship provided me with an incredibly enriching exposure to issues that affect low-income immigrants who have been victims of domestic violence. The help that Legal Aid provides to these people who seek help navigating the increasingly-complex immigration process is admirable. It is greatly satisfying to have been part of this service, and so my commitment to pursuing a legal career in public service and helping people of scarce resources is ever-increasing.

During my work as a legal intern, I mainly worked on cases where the clients were victims of domestic violence and sought lawful immigration status through the option of a U Visa (U Nonimmigrant Status), as well as through the pathways offered by the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Self-Petition. Both of these options can lead to lawful permanent residence and eventually, U.S. Citizenship for the clients. With the guidance of my supervising attorney, I gained extensive experience interviewing clients. My Spanish-speaking skills were very helpful, as a large portion of the people that the Legal Aid Society serves are of Hispanic origin. I observed how indispensable it is to build rapport and gain the client's trust in order to be able to help them. Earning a domestic violence victim's trust is no easy task, however, as they have been hurt by people they loved, so it is a common factor for them to have difficulty trusting others. It was thus necessary for me to understand them and their experiences thoroughly in order to be able to obtain the necessary information and consequently be able to successfully obtain lawful immigrant status for the clients. Another common challenge that domestic violence victims face regarding their immigration is that they may have escaped the abusive situation in which they were, but were unable to take with them documents necessary for meeting the requirements of a U Visa or VAWA self-petition. These cases strongly highlight the need for advocacy for disadvantaged individuals, as they might not be able to obtain lawful immigrant status without proper legal counsel.

I also observed that, in order to properly advocate for these clients before the government, we as counsel must sometimes be creative and consider all options that might help their case. A case that stands out in my experience as a legal intern at the Legal Aid Society was that of a woman

who entered the United States without inspection, and thus had no immigrant status. She married her husband when they were deeply in love with each other and lived happily for some time. However, the husband turned abusive after she was arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). When she was released, he talked to her aggressively, and began preventing her from eating. Not having employment authorization, she was not able to earn her own money, and her husband stopped giving her money and resources for sustenance, so she could not buy food. When other would offer her food, her husband would say she had already eaten. Her husband starved her this way for several weeks, to the extent that she weighed sixty pounds and was extremely ill at the time that she was finally able to free herself from his abuse. One of the challenges that we faced with this client was the fact that she, as many other domestic violence victims, was not able to obtain some important documents. Fortunately, we were able to obtain additional supporting evidence through other channels such as affidavits. It was very gratifying to hear this client telling us that outside of her family, my supervising attorney and I were the only ones she trusted, because she knew that we were trying to help her. At that moment, I realized that rapport with the client is essential to be able to help a client. It was immensely satisfying to see this particular client grow healthier with time and as she attended the counseling sessions that we set up with local non-profits and shelters.

I feel very fortunate to have been able to serve low-income victims of domestic violence who needed legal services regarding their immigration status. My passion for immigration law and my commitment to the public interest sector continue to grow as a result of my experience at the Legal Aid Society. This opportunity was invaluable in informing and shaping my learning and decision-making process about my future legal career. The Equal Justice America Fellowship was extremely helpful in enabling me to pursue this non-profit legal internship, and I am very thankful to have been chosen as a 2013 EJA Fellow.

Sincerely,

Christie Diaz  
Cornell Law School  
J.D. 2015