

## **Equal Justice America Fellowship Questionnaire: Part I**

I spent my summer fellowship at IRIS, Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, a comprehensive social services agency for refugees and immigrants in New Haven, CT. I have always been passionate about serving the immigrant community, and the IRIS Legal Department, a newer branch of the non-profit, has been an incredible way to do that.

At the Legal Office, I saw clients pretty much every day. The services I was able to provide were broad, ranging from routine green card applications to preparing asylum claims. I had to stay on my toes, learning more about immigration law every day, to be able to answer questions people had about the complexities of their immigration status, getting visas for the children they haven't seen in years, or the details of what steps they should take when they are afraid to return home. I saw how often immigration law collided with other aspects of the law, as women with abusive spouses, men with long criminal histories, and children in the middle of custody battles came into the office with another immigration question. I also was able to see the practical end of how an office was run, by answering phones, making copies, and translating documents in French and Spanish. Another part of IRIS's work this summer included court representation. I would regularly interview and screen individuals who were in immigrant detention or who had pending court cases to see if they had any legal options to stay. I would work with my supervisor, attorney Olia Yelner, to attempt to secure counsel for them at no cost. I took on the exciting task of notifying them the good news when their case had been accepted, and the difficult task of telling them there was nothing we could do. In addition to court representation, I worked on a handbook that decodes the processes and procedures of applying for immigration benefits in a way that new refugees and asylees could understand, to be used to educate the public and to train future volunteers and interns at IRIS. Needless to say, it was a busy summer.

Perhaps what has impacted me the most about my experience over these past few months has been the raw human aspect of immigration that is so easily lost in the hard and fast rules of the law. Interacting daily with clients from Afghanistan, Iraq, Liberia, Colombia, and Congo has opened my eyes, like it or not, to the reality of an immigrant's life—the challenges of being in a foreign culture, the depth of the suffering each refugee has experienced, the fear of losing status or having to go back to where they came from. Engaging with those stories within the framework of complex and often mysterious laws has been challenging for me, and I now see much more clearly how much distance really does exist between those on the margins, poor immigrants and refugees in particular, and the protections actually offered to those individuals by the law. Many immigrants had no idea what they were eligible to apply for and when. Many others had been harmed in the past by expensive attorneys who didn't really care. This was a population that has grown used to mistrusting authorities, and it was amazing to be part of a law office that was helping and restoring dignity, not just taking advantage of their confusion and vulnerability.

I know now, more than I did before, that I want to use my law degree to bridge that divide, and interpret the law for people on the margins so that they

know what their rights are and feel that their story matters. This summer was truly incredible. I learned so much, and I know that I made a difference. I saw families reunited, I watched refugees smile as the law finally made *sense* to them, and I know that people felt affirmed and cared for in the process. My commitment to public interest law is certainly stronger as a result.

Christina Colón

Dear Dan:

This summer IRIS- Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services had the pleasure of hosting Christina Colon as an intern. Christina spent the summer in direct contact with IRIS's legal services clients. Christina conducted intake interviews in English, Spanish and French with immigrants seeking asylum and other immigration representation. She completed dozens of immigration applications and conducted legal research on complex immigration topics. Every client with whom Christina worked reported having a great experience. Christina's friendly demeanor and excellent "bedside manner" put even the most nervous clients at ease; she was able to extract complex stories from shy clients and did an excellent job of organizing their words into complete asylum packets.

Christina also did a lot of administrative work: she helped to compile a training manual to assist future interns and make their transitions into IRIS smoother. Christina did all of these tasks, many of which required long hours and patience, with a smile and exuberance. These qualities, as well as Christina's work ethic, benefited IRIS and its clients in numerous ways.

Christina is well-liked by both clients and staff, and her work has helped dozens of families and individuals this summer. Thank you for providing the generous grant that allowed IRIS to benefit from Christina's immense talents this summer.

Thanks again!

Olivia Yelner  
Immigration Attorney