

Equal Justice America Fellowship Summary Letter

August 30, 2015

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer, I had the pleasure of participating in a ten-week legal internship at The Door, a unique agency in New York City that provides comprehensive services to young people aged twelve to twenty-four, as an Equal Justice America Fellow. The Legal Services Center here at The Door is equipped to handle any civil legal concerns brought to us by Door members, but the most pressing demand from our clientele is frequently immigration, so I, along with a majority of the Legal staff, work exclusively with young people who have immigration concerns.

The majority of our clients are in deportation proceedings. A great thing that The Door and a coalition of other service providers in the city does office is screen *pro se* young people who are appearing as part of the “Surge Docket” at Immigration Court each week. We thus are able to ensure that as many young people as possible do not have to face deportation without legal representation. This work is crucial, because the court system can be extremely difficult to navigate, particularly for the young non-English speakers we work with, and people without legal representation are much less likely to successfully obtain an immigration remedy. Our system is unique and provides an excellent safety net to ensure that unrepresented clients do not fall through the cracks of the legal service provider system; I hope service providers outside of New York can soon develop similar systems in their communities. After screening and accepting clients, I worked with Door staff on a variety of cases, including petitions for asylum, prosecutorial discretion, and Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. My favorite part of working at The Door is the clients, and since we provide direct representation and believe that young people should be the drivers of their cases, I spent a lot of time working directly with these incredible young people.

AHA, a young man from Honduras, fled his home country on account of the racially-motivated gang violence he and his family faced in Honduras. AHA has had several extended

family members murdered by gangs in Honduras, and is extremely scared to return to his home country due to threats he has received. He believes that he is being targeted due to the fact that he was employed in an area with rampant unemployment, and the gang members who threatened him repeatedly commented that “Garifuna (an ethnic minority group in Central America with African roots) are taking all of our jobs.” Garifuna are also being targeted by gang members because they own land on the Honduran coast, a strategically valuable location for drug trafficking. The Door is helping AHA pursue an asylum claim. Over the course of my internship, I drafted an initial petition to file so that we could preserve AHA’s one-year deadline for filing an asylum claim. I also helped interview AHA in his subsequent appointments at The Door to obtain more information for his case, and have helped him complete steps necessary for him to win his Legal Permanent Resident status, such as accompanying him to get his fingerprints taken.

MMP, also from Honduras, is being represented by The Door along with her two brothers. MMP and her siblings suffered greatly at the hands of their mother in Honduras, who abandoned the children twice, and was verbally and physically abusive when she was around. MMP has been beaten mercilessly, and was denied any chance at a normal childhood by her controlling mother, who would force the children to kneel on sand and hold heavy chairs above their heads for long stretches of time if she discovered them leaving the house to play with other children. MMP also begun experiencing trouble with gangs; she was assaulted by gangs twice, and after that gang members frequently drove past her house menacingly, even after she moved locations. MMP finally fled to the United States to be with her father and siblings. We are seeking Special Immigrant Juvenile Status for MMP and her brothers, and the three siblings are flourishing in the United States. MMP enjoys school, and has aspirations to be an artist when she grows up. In addition to receiving legal assistance at The Door, MMP is attending art classes offered to Door members.

My work this summer was extremely meaningful to me, as I felt directly responsible for empowering smart, talented, and ambitious young people to make better lives for themselves in the United States. Thanks, Equal Justice America!

Rachael Siegel

Columbia Law School Class of 2017