

August 31, 2014

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I write to you to apprise you of the experience that I had this summer. The work that I did was made possible in large part by the award that I received from Equal Justice America, and I am very grateful for the generosity and impact that your foundation facilitates. This summer I worked at the Legal Aid Society – Employment Law Center. I worked there for ten weeks and lived in San Francisco for approximately eleven weeks. I received generous funding from Harvard, but the fact remains that San Francisco is an extraordinarily expensive city: without the supplemental funding from EJA, I would likely have had to have taken out additional loans to cover my living expenses.

My work this summer was very challenging, rewarding, and interesting. I worked in the Gender Equity and LGBTQ Rights Project, mostly doing work with sexual harassment (involving citizens as well as undocumented immigrants who were targeted for their legal vulnerability), pregnancy accommodation and discrimination, gender/sexual orientation discrimination, and domestic violence discrimination and accommodation. All of these areas of law were very new, as I had only had a higher-level survey of employment law before this summer, and had participated in a clinic centered on employment law, albeit one dealing with issues of race and disability discrimination. Working in California was especially rewarding, given the heightened protections that are codified in the law at both the state and city levels.

On a typical day, my co-clerk in the Gender Equity program and I would receive between five and ten intake calls from either primarily Spanish-speaking clients or primarily English-speaking clients. We would return their calls, ask them for certain demographic details, and then ask them to explain their legal issues. Following this, we would perform legal research on our own, then present both the problem and our proposed advice to one of the attorneys in the program. We would also advise about whether we thought it would be appropriate to simply give legal advice, or to write a demand letter on the client's behalf, or to possibly initiate litigation. Regardless, we would then call the client back and relay what we had discussed with the attorney.

This is the process through which I met one special client, whom I will call Melissa. Melissa was the survivor of domestic violence, and had had to flee her hometown because she did not feel safe living there with her abuser. She made a series of reasonable requests to her employers, all of which she was legally entitled to have granted to her. Unfortunately, her employer was being uncooperative. As such, I ended up speaking with Melissa just about every day for a whole month, as her situation involved, as new details emerged or new points of conflict arose, etc. Toward the end of my stint at the Legal Aid Society, Melissa and I resolved all of her legal issues. She had told me that she felt that I was the only one fighting on her

behalf, and who cared about her. I assured her that this was not true – before every call I made to her, I had to speak with one of the attorneys who worked at the Legal Aid Society, all of whom were certainly concerned with her situation – but it was true that I did feel protective and deeply interested in her well-being, even though we had never met.

Another client involved someone who had been paid unemployment benefits, with the government later deciding that she had been receiving them inappropriately. This type of determination carries significant penalties, and obviously for someone who has been on unemployment, paying back the principle – much less the penalty – is exceedingly difficult. This was a project that I took on as a supplement to my normal duties, and ended up working two weekends in a row in order to turn around the brief on time. When we finally got the memorandum finished, we sent her a copy. She wrote back that she had tears in her eyes as she read it, grateful for the work that complete strangers had done for her, for free, in a way that accurately portrayed her innocence. That was in the last week of the program, and just recently one of the attorneys wrote to us to tell us that the portion of the memorandum for which I was responsible was received favorably by the EDD (California's body for administering unemployment insurance and adjudicating overpayment determinations), and as such, her penalty would be reduced by \$23,000. I could not have been happier – for the woman who never deserved to pay that money in the first place, nor for the fruits of the labor that I put into this project.

There are several other stories that I could relate, but in general these two sum up the fantastic experience that I had this summer. I want to thank you again for facilitating this work, and for agreeing to fund me, even as I missed the original deadline. EJA is a fantastic resource for Harvard students and for others, and I am so glad that I was selected as a fund recipient.

Very best,

Conor Ahern
Harvard Law School 2015