

August 31, 2009

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

Dear Mr. Rubin,

I'd like to thank you for the fellowship grant I was awarded by Equal Justice America for my summer work at Make the Road New York. The \$1000 grant made all of the difference for me this summer. Although my law school does provide summer grants for students to engage in public interest work, I would not have been able to survive, absent the EJA grant, in New York City without adding to my considerable debt load. The debt I am accruing in law school is a major consideration in my career plans and, therefore, any reduction thereof is a nudge in the direction of a public interest career.

I had a spectacular summer at Make the Road New York. Make the Road is a grassroots membership-based organization that uses community and electoral organizing, impact litigation, and legal and support services to improve the lives of low-income Bushwick residents, most of whom are Latino immigrants. I worked on the legal services team, under the auspices of John Whitlow, the supervising attorney in charge of housing cases. The bulk of my work consisted of assisting him in his caseload, at every stage. Starting with intake interviews, I was in constant contact with our clients. I researched wherever John needed me, and we concocted legal strategies together. Also, the member-based structure of Make the Road meant that I had to serve member's miscellaneous legal and quasi-legal needs—I spent a lot of time negotiating payment plans with ConEdison, for example.

A couple of members and cases stick out in my mind as particularly vivid examples of my meaningful and inspiring summer work. John and I worked on a case where we represented three families who live in an apartment building. The apartment used to have six apartments, but the ground floor apartments were united such that it now only contains five. This fact is significant because New York City rent regulation laws only apply to buildings with six or more units, and a landlord cannot reduce the number of units to avoid rent regulation. The landlord wanted to skyrocket the rents that our clients were paying, and in order to prevent these families from losing their affordable housing, we had to prove that the building had had six units. The New York City Department of Buildings information was conflicting, and sometimes suspiciously missing. Accordingly, John and I had to get scrappy and innovative, knocking on doors, bringing in expert architects, scouring the depths of New York City building archives, to build our case. The case goes to trial in a few weeks, and, although my official internship is over and school is in full swing, I wouldn't miss the trial for the world.

Another case that sticks out in my mind is one of a Mexican-born woman whose

apartment is in a terrible condition. On top of her 'everyday' problems, she had to contend with shoddy electrical wiring, which nearly caused a fire and left her and her five children without power for almost two weeks. At every stage, our client persevered and yet refused to accept the unlawful conditions of her apartment. We followed her as she organized the other families in her building to support legal actions against the negligent landlord, and with the whole building on board, we were able to set the foundation for a "7A motion," which would wrest the building from the slumlord and put it in the control of a court-appointed administrator. During my short stay at Make the Road I was not able to see the litigation phase of this case, participating in the organization phase was powerful and inspiring.

I also got glimpses of smaller victories. On one of my last days, a woman for whom I had translated some Ecuadorian birth certificates for a citizenship application approached me with a smile and a huge hug. She said that she had passed her interview and was becoming a citizen. It was wonderful to be able to share in her joy at that moment and even to have had a small part in it. Moreover, the beauty of Make the Road is that the small legal victories aren't seen in isolation, but as part of the mammoth ongoing campaign to effect major societal change. Tellingly, this woman was on her way help out, along with throngs of our other members, to a City Council press conference celebrating the victory of providing language access to pharmacies for non-English speaking New Yorkers.

As the above anecdotes hopefully illustrate, this summer was an enriching experience, one that reconfirmed my commitment to practice law in the public interest. Without Equal Justice America, that path would have been much more arduous. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

David Menninger  
New York University, Class of 2011