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During my summer at the Juvenile Rights Practice of the Legal Aid Society, I learned that representing children requires far more than a sound legal mind—it requires patience, empathy, and sincerity. I interviewed clients of every age, color, and creed. I wrote memos for attorneys on different legal issues. And thanks in large part to the funding provided by Equal Justice America, I was able to learn about both juvenile delinquency and child protection. I encountered the difficulties of applying to college with no parental support. I discovered new forms of cruelty and observed simple happiness. Only a few individuals across America, it seems, are capable and willing to work in the fields of both juvenile justice and child protection. It can be emotionally draining, but it is even more emotionally rewarding.

My experience at JRP was as varied as the clients I encountered. One young girl I interviewed had been placed into kinship foster care. Her birth mother was an alcoholic and drug addict. She liked her new home, but she wanted to live with a parent (her mother and father were divorced). Her mom was complying with all required services, and with her father largely out of the picture, it looked as though she could move back in with her mom. However, she told me that her mother had hit her with a belt on her most recent visit. Her dad was attending school and was spending a lot of time with her. He had purchased a new apartment. He was excited to be a real father for the first time. Because of our interview, my supervisor was able to advocate for her interests in court—that she wanted to be placed with her father. Equal Justice America helped me to ensure that this young girl would be provided with a home in which she would be loved and cared for.

I also had experience with older clients. One young woman in foster care needed help applying to colleges. High school over, she couldn't reach out to a guidance counselor. She had to choose between two college choices—one in Louisiana and one in New York. Though she settled on the one closer to home, the question of cost still loomed large. I contacted college admissions experts at schools and at the state level, to figure out how she could obtain a financial aid package that fit her situation. Even though this specific client's needs did not relate to a specific court case, this sort of work exemplifies the enormity of the task that Legal Aid attorneys face on a daily basis.

Unfortunately, the fact remains that many social workers at foster care agencies simply do not have the training and education that would be optimal for individuals in their position. What they are unable to accomplish is often left to Legal Aid attorneys. Thus, the Legal Aid attorney's advocacy extends far beyond the halls of the courthouse. The attorneys will often find themselves exploring job, educational, and housing opportunities for their juvenile clients—because few others have the time, capability, or understanding to do so. Being a child's attorney,

therefore, is a commitment—one that may last well after the conclusion of any formal court proceeding.

Of course, Legal Aid attorneys are lawyers first. I observed hearings, trials, and mediations. Juvenile attorneys must be well versed in all methods of legal adjudication. I wrote motions, including one requesting a hearing to order the administration of psychotropic medication for a client. The medication would enable our client to gain independence and hopefully lead to his being able to speak for himself.

I am now certain I will enter the field of child protection and juvenile justice. Because of Equal Justice America's generous support, I was able to connect with children and use my budding knowledge of the law to offer them assistance, support, and friendship. Children I had never met before seemed to implicitly understand I was there to help—they were open and honest. They drew me pictures. They asked about my own family. And although some days I would write case digests, copying notes in which doctors relayed horrible details of child abuse, and grew angry and frustrated, I could not have hoped for a better summer experience.

I thank Equal Justice America again for all your support. I encourage you to continue to provide law students with a sense of security so they may explore new opportunities as I did. You have my word that I will gain employment in child protection or juvenile justice as soon as I graduate law school. The work I experienced this past summer is my calling, and it is now officially my passion.

With all my best, I am hopeful for the future of public interest law and Equal Justice America,

David A. Shapiro

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August 27, 2010

Dan Ruben  
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Dear Mr. Ruben:

My name is Dena Kesselman and I am a staff attorney at the Legal Aid Society, Juvenile Rights Practice in Brooklyn. I worked with David Shapiro, a law school intern, this summer. Here at the Juvenile Rights Practice, we represent children in Brooklyn Family Court on juvenile delinquency cases, child protection cases, and, occasionally, custody cases. I, myself, only work on child protection and custody cases.

It really was a pleasure to supervise David Shapiro this summer. He came into the office everyday with a lot of enthusiasm, and he kept up this enthusiasm for the entirety of his summer internship with us. In the beginning of the summer, David did a lot of shadowing – he came with me and his other attorney supervisors to Court to observe our court proceedings and he also observed several client interviews. After a few weeks, I had David meet with and interview several of my clients on his own. Some he conducted in the office, and some he conducted on home visits. I had David meet with clients of all ages, ranging from 4 years old to 20 years old. He worked especially well with our teenage clients. He related to them very well and made them feel very comfortable speaking with him.

David found that he has a particular interest in assisting our teen clients in preparing to apply and attend college. He did a lot of research pertaining to different scholarship and grant options for our foster care clients. He put together a very useful document that concisely lists resources and guidelines for scholarship money and state and federal government school grants. I now give this document out to all of my teen clients who are interested in applying to college.

David researched several legal issues for attorneys in the office and helped attorneys write motions. He also researched several specific client issues, regarding public benefits, settlements, and recreational and educational activities in which clients were interested. He even attended an important foster care agency conference in place of a social worker who was unable to attend. David tackled whatever assignment that was given to him with gusto. He had friendly and respectful working relationships with our office staff and the other summer interns. It was very evident to me that David is passionate about the struggles our young clients go through in Family Court. He has shown me that he is willing to work hard and really commit himself in order to fight for a client.

Thank you so much for helping to make David Shapiro's summer internship with the Legal Aid Society Juvenile Rights Practice possible. Please feel free to contact me with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Dena Kesselman, Esq.  
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The Legal Aid Society, Juvenile Rights Practice  
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