

August 30, 2014

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This past summer I worked at the Legal Services of South Central Michigan's Family Law Project. There, I assisted low-income survivors of domestic abuse with family law matters, including helping them to obtain personal protection orders, divorces, and custody of their children. I learned a lot about family law and improved my practical lawyering skills through this fellowship, and I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Equal Justice America for giving me the opportunity to have such a wonderful and worthwhile summer experience.

In college, I took a psychology seminar on trauma. A portion of the class consisted of discussions centered around the psychology of domestic violence and its effects – not only on the abuser and the survivor, but also on their families and particularly their children. So when I began working at the Family Law Project, I had some background knowledge of the clientele with whom I would be working. I had learned about the cycle of violence and had mentally prepared for the fact that some of our clients might change their minds about obtaining a divorce or personal protection order, perhaps because they were still stuck in the cycle. But despite the knowledge that I had about psychological theories on domestic violence, I was still shocked as I listened to our clients struggle to recount their stories of abuse, and I was profoundly touched by their bravery and willingness to share their stories with me.

One of the legal services that the Family Law Project provides is helping our clients to obtain personal protection orders. In order to file for a personal protection order, the client has to make allegations about the abuser and convince the judge that an order is necessary. I was responsible for drafting many allegations over the summer, so I heard a lot of terrible stories of how abusers would control and manipulate our clients – not just physically, but also verbally, mentally, emotionally, and economically.

I remember meeting with a client, Claire\*, who was in desperate need of a personal protection order. She had been with her abuser for a few years and they had a young child together. Claire had suffered unimaginable horrors at the hands of her abuser and had physical scars as daily reminders of the pain she had endured during their relationship. As we began discussing specific incidents of violence, Claire broke down and began sobbing. She told me that since she filed reports with the police, her conversation with me was the first time that she was talking to somebody about some of these incidents. She told me how scared she was for her own life and especially for the safety of her toddler. And she told me how difficult it had been for her to finally realize that she needed to get out of the relationship, and how thankful she was for what we were doing to help her.

\*Client's name has been changed to protect her privacy.

Sadly, the severity of Claire's story of abuse was not unusual from the stories of some of the other clients that I had this summer. And, like many of our clients, Claire inspired me by her strength and resilience during such a difficult period of her life. But most importantly, Claire, and each client that I assisted, reminded me of the great responsibility that comes with being a legal advocate. Not only could I use my training and abilities to help our clients with their legal issues, but I also could make a big difference in the lives of our clients' families, and hopefully help to set each of our clients on a path to a brighter future.

But beyond the satisfaction that I derived from helping our clients, I learned a lot about practical lawyering. During client appointments I observed how our attorneys interacted with our clients and handled sensitive topics. I appeared in court under the supervision of staff attorneys. And I was able to sit in on a divorce mediation session. All of these experiences taught me about different skills that a good lawyer should possess, and I was challenged to develop many of those skills throughout my fellowship.

Without the assistance of Equal Justice America, I may not have done the work that I did this summer and advocated for the people that I did. So I would like to thank Equal Justice America again for this amazing opportunity to allow students like me to do such meaningful work. Through this fellowship, I was reminded of the importance of providing legal services to low-income people in the community, and of how lawyers have a social responsibility to use their skills and education to give back to those who are most in need. I am deeply grateful for this experience.

Sincerely,

Dayna M. Chikamoto  
University of Michigan Law School  
Juris Doctor Candidate, December 2015

\*Client's name has been changed to protect her privacy.