

August 30, 2013

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My Summer Fellowship was with the Chicago Legal Clinic (CLC) at their Austin Law Circle Office. The Austin office primarily handles family law heard cases in Domestic Relations Court and heads the Clinic's Ex-Offender Advocacy Program (EAP). I've been at CLC since last May and I honestly enjoyed every minute of it.

This summer, I had my 711 license, which allowed me to step up in court on behalf of our clients. The experience of speaking in court, while definitely daunting and nerve-racking at first, was incredibly thrilling. One of my most rewarding experiences came just the other day, at a prove-up for our client, Melanie.* I actually drafted the initial pleadings in Melanie's divorce case last summer, at the beginning of my time at CLC. Earlier this week, we had the prove-up for Melanie's case, which is the final stage in a divorce case. To say this day was a long time coming would be an understatement.

Melanie's case was a particularly difficult one, due in no small part to her (now ex-) husband's unwillingness to cooperate. Melanie first came to our office after having been separated for over a year. She had three teenaged children and an order of protection against her husband. She was a sympathetic case on paper, and she was one of my favorite clients to work with. Melanie's husband bounced around from address to address, and we were forced to waste a lot of time trying to serve him. I would have to call Melanie time after time saying the process server was unable to locate Marvin, but each time, she wouldn't give up and we would talk about the next steps in the case.

At one point in the case, Marvin filed his own petition for dissolution, which raised some interesting legal issues. After discussing strategy, the consequences and benefits of our actions, and considering our client's needs, my boss and I developed a game plan of how to proceed. Of course, Marvin threw another wrench in our plans at that point. Finally, however, we were able to reach a settlement earlier this month and had Melanie's divorce finalized just the other day. I hugged Melanie in the hallway after we left the courtroom and felt a rush of relief wash over me. I had seen this case through, from start to finish, and I really felt that this family was now in the best place for them to move forward with their lives and start anew.

The Austin office also handles the Clinic's EAP cases, which includes clients petitioning for clemency and asking for an executive pardon from the governor. I wrote two clemency petitions this summer, but one of them in particular really changed me. I liked Tina from the first day I interviewed her in late fall 2012, when we were deciding if we would be able to take her case. My notes from the intake session end with me emphatically recommending her case and saying how I think she would be a stellar client.

My boss decided to accept Tina and I was assigned to write her petition.

Writing a petition for clemency entails meeting with the client about five times for an hour or so each time to get details on their personal and criminal histories. I met with Tina a few times for the longer interviews and we got along just as well as we had during her initial intake. I turned my first draft into my boss after a few meetings with Tina and was feeling pretty confident in her case. However, my boss read the petition after having never spoken in-depth with Tina, and had a completely different take on her case.

My boss told me that she didn't feel that Tina's petition conveyed the appropriate levels of acceptance (of past wrong doing). One of the points that Tina kept stressing in our interviews was that she now tries to isolate herself from other because she thinks that she got into trouble in her youth because she was hanging out with the wrong kinds of people. My boss got the impression that Tina hadn't fully addressed her issues and was avoiding the underlying problems; when we submit a petition we really want the client to have progressed fully from the person she were when she was convicted, and, to a fresh set of eyes, that wasn't apparent in Tina's case.

My boss said that we needed to speak with Tina and see if she really had addressed any of her issues or if she was still in denial. She offered to meet with Tina because we needed to be pretty frank with her about some deeply personal issues. The bottom line was that we wouldn't be able to submit Tina's petition for consideration if we didn't see the acceptance and growth we needed to. It was going to be a difficult conversation, to be sure.

However, after having developed somewhat of a relationship with Tina, I felt like it was my responsibility to have this conversation with her. The meeting was very difficult and very emotional. Tina cried a bit, and we talked in more detail about some of her underlying issues. At this point, I really did feel like a counselor at law, taking the best interests of my client to heart and pushing her to realize them. At the end of the meeting, I had the notes I needed to rework the petition and Tina said she felt like she had a breakthrough. I was elated. Deciding to conduct the meeting with Tina myself was one of the most difficult choices I've had to make, but it was rewarding in the end; I felt like I performed services to our client to the best of my abilities and, in time, submitted a strong petition for clemency.

I felt like I grew substantially in terms of both knowledge and skills this summer. Speaking in court was exhilarating (if not panic-inducing at times), and I worked on more complicated pleadings and legal research than ever before. I'm excited to be continuing at CLC this fall and can't wait to follow through on some of my cases from summer (and before!). I'm incredibly grateful to EJA for offering me financial support this summer.

**Names of clients have been changed.*

Sincerely,

Ellen Porter

Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Class of 2014