

August 25, 2009

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This past summer, I worked for LIFT (Legal Information for Families Today), a nonprofit organization that serves individuals navigating the New York Family Court system. For the majority of the summer, I was stationed in the Bronx Family Court, where I, along with a full-time LIFT employee, manned LIFT's information site. I also spent approximately two weeks at LIFT's main office in Manhattan, where I answered calls on the LIFT hotline and translated three resource guides into Hebrew.

LIFT draws a fine line between providing legal information and legal advice. As I was not serving as counsel for the litigants with whom I spoke, I was authorized to offer them information, but not advice. At times this line was somewhat difficult to draw, and it was likewise not always easy to avoid giving advice. The vast majority of those served by LIFT were pro se individuals, and would often ask how I thought they should proceed with their cases. Though I had to reply that I wasn't authorized to answer these questions, I was capable of answering many other inquiries far more affirmatively.

The questions I received over the summer ran the gamut of Family Court matters. The most commonly discussed topics, however, were child support, custody and visitation, and orders of protection. Though some questions touched on slightly more obscure topics such as name changes and the PINS process, the above issues were the most prevalent throughout my tenure with LIFT.

What initially drew me to this position was the amount of hands-on exposure to "real-life" cases I envisioned it providing. From my first day in the Bronx, I saw that my expectations in this regard would certainly be realized. I was speaking with individuals in the midst of some of the most intense periods of their lives, encountering decidedly life-altering situations. Everyday I heard stories of parents trying to keep their families intact and single parents struggling to provide for their children. I saw people come in early in the morning, visibly shaken, asking for information about obtaining orders of protection; I could only imagine what they had been through the night before. This contact with people in the midst of their most trying times was invaluable to me in terms of concretizing the potential to use a position to affect and improve the lives of others.

The work I did, in short, was incredibly fulfilling. Though sometimes frustrating and often tedious, it allowed me to provide substantial assistance to those truly needing it. Some of the questions I answered were as simple as "Where is the bathroom?" while others were complex enough to warrant a twenty minute conversation. Regardless of the sort of information I provided, however, helping people navigate what is clearly an overwhelming and intimidating process was extremely rewarding.

One particular aspect of my experience stands out, largely because it occurred so many times throughout the summer. Many of the litigants with whom I spoke came into the courtroom noticeably beleaguered. I learned quite quickly that this stemmed from – among other things - a sense that the fate of their families would be determined by a random ruling handed down from some faceless judge. By simply explaining how the judicial system operated, I was able to empower many of these people. Though I obviously could not tell them whether or not they would prevail in their cases, I was able to impart a certain degree of faith in the system; a belief that their sides of the story would be heard and evaluated in a sensible and evenhanded manner. To many people, this knowledge seemed to make all the difference in the world.

In sum, my experience with LIFT was a truly enlightening and gratifying one. I got a glimpse of what it means for individuals to – quite literally – have to fight for their families, and gained an appreciation for the emotional toll such can take. I am very pleased that I was able to spend my summer providing assistance to these families, and I am extremely grateful to Equal Justice America for helping to make that possible.

Sincerely,

Elliot Buckman  
Fordham University School of Law  
Class of 2011