

August 4, 2009

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am writing this letter to thank you for the summer internship funding I received through Equal Justice America.

I spent my summer working at the Galveston office of Lone Star Legal Aid. The mission at Lone Star is to provide free, comprehensive civil legal services for populations throughout Southeast Texas. The operative word is “comprehensive.” Though I did my fair share of formal legal work—drafting motions, researching issues, preparing cases, and the like—I also engaged in what I consider to be the equally important “social” side of the law.

The social side of the law is different from anything I encountered in the classroom. On the one hand, interviews with clients would often turn into fact-finding safaris, forcing me to find the legally relevant material in a sea of statements meant more to communicate a sense of being wronged than a formal legal claim. On the other hand, dealing with clients who would hide information, for fear that Lone Star would not represent them if they knew the whole truth, could be equally frustrating. Learning to strike the balance between allowing the client to continue with a line of statements and when to redirect the conversation was a learning experience, one that I am sure will continue as I practice law after graduation from law school.

The social side of the law also included connecting people to charities and other aid organizations that could provide them with services they needed when legal and administrative channels did not recognize their plight. This often happened with clients who assumed the best of their landlords, and relied on the common-sense intuition that they would not have to pay for things that they did not use. For example, one of my clients was unable to dispute her post-Ike water bill with the City of Galveston, despite not having lived in the apartment for over seven months and being on-time with all of her bills before the hurricane. I was able to connect her with an organization known as the Galveston Community Action Council, which helps residents return to normalcy on the island, and served as a resource when other sources of aid—whether governmental, insurance, or legal—did not meet the needs of our clients.

The highlight of my summer was the opportunity I was given to represent a client in the Justice of the Peace court, entirely on my own. I had to interview the client, research the issues relevant to her case, prepare a court notebook, and learn the rules of evidence in the span of a few short weeks. I was able to get hands-on experience with procedural tools I had only read about, including making objections, cross-examining witnesses, asking for continuances, and having the court issue subpoenas. In the end, though I was nervous, I was able to secure a judgment in favor of my client on the important issue in the case, namely, that she had a continued right to possession of her apartment. Being able to keep her in her apartment in turn allowed her to retain her federal housing subsidy. By handling this case, I was able to learn and provide help at the same time; to me, there was no more rewarding experience this summer.

I am perhaps most thankful for my funding—in part through Equal Justice America and in part through Cornell’s Public Interest Fellowship (PIF) program—because I have seen first-

hand the need that exists for additional manpower in the field of public interest law. We had to turn away hundreds of deserving clients with mere pro se forms or other brief service, simply because we did not have the time in the office to handle every case with the attention it deserved. My PIF and EJA funding allowed me to help somewhat in this regard, but it is clear to me that a more systemic change is needed to achieve equal protection and equal justice under the law for those unable to afford counsel. Wherever I end up practicing law—whether in the government, in private practice, or elsewhere—this is one issue that has been brought home to me in clear fashion this summer, and one that I hope I will be able to address continually through my career.

Sincerely,

-Francis Sohn
Cornell University Law School
Candidate for J.D., 2011