

September 6, 2007

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am very grateful to Equal Justice America for awarding me a summer fellowship for the summer of 2007. The fellowship funded my work as summer counsel at the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau. Through my work at the bureau, I gained an enormous amount of legal experience and met some great people.

Unfortunately, the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau is unable to pay its interns. Without the fellowship from Equal Justice America, I could not have worked at the bureau because I would not have been able to pay my living expenses. Although the bureau handles housing, domestic, benefits, and wage and hour cases, my practice consisted solely of housing cases. On the very first day of my internship, my supervisors assigned me the five cases that I would spend the rest of the summer handling. In all of the cases, we were representing tenants in eviction proceedings.

I soon learned that two of the cases were supposed to go to trial over the summer. One of my first assignments was to accompany the client in one of those cases to a meeting with her psychologist and drug counselor. In order to establish the defense we wanted to use at trial, we needed the psychologist to testify on our client's behalf, so I wanted to establish a good relationship with him. After meeting my client for the first time, I went into the meeting with the two counselors. The meeting went very well, and the psychologist thanked me for traveling to the clinic and taking such an active interest in my client's life. Although the case did not go to trial over the summer because the court never scheduled a trial date, the information I received from the meeting will be very helpful to the students and attorneys who will be handling the case this fall.

Aside from that brief assignment, the rest of the first half of the summer was entirely consumed by trial preparation for the other case. I worked very long hours interviewing my client and witnesses and then preparing them for trial. I accompanied the bureau's housing inspector to our client's apartment in order to substantiate the unsanitary conditions defenses we planned on using. I wrote direct examinations of all of our witnesses as well as cross-examinations of the landlord's witnesses. In the week before trial, the four of us who were working on the case worked very long hours, including an entire weekend. We were also attempting to settle the case during that time by meeting with opposing counsel and attending a mediation session at Boston Housing Court.

I was ready to try the case on the Monday morning when the trial was supposed to start, but we chose to settle instead of proceeding with the trial. If we had put the case in

front of a jury, the jury would probably have determined that our client owed many thousands of dollars in unpaid rent. If the jury did make such a determination, our client would have been unable to cover that arrearage and would have had to move out of her apartment on short notice. Instead, she was able to stay in her apartment for another two months with the landlord waiving all claims against her. Our client was very happy with the resolution of her case. She was very thankful. She subsequently moved into another apartment that she prefers to the apartment she was in before. On the one hand, I was bummed because I had spent so much time preparing for trial and it would have been my first chance to try a case, but on the other hand, the settlement was a better result for our client, and that is more important.

With that case out of the way, I was able to turn my attention to my other cases. I represented another one of my clients in an appeal hearing at the Boston Housing Authority. Our client asked that we use an interpreter, and we had to supply our own interpreter. It was a challenge to examine our client through the interpreter, but I am sure that I will benefit from the experience later on.

Yet another valuable experience was working at the Attorney for a Day table at Boston Housing Court on a few different occasions. We would supply advice to any tenant who asked for it prior to their hearings at the court. I met a young woman who was eight months pregnant and in danger of being kicked out of her apartment. Her abusive boyfriend was on the lease for the apartment but she was not. After he hurt her and she obtained a restraining order against him, he left the apartment and did not pay any rent. The landlord agreed to let her stay in the apartment in exchange for weekly payments. Unfortunately, she soon lost her job and was unable to make the payments. The landlord started a legal proceeding to evict the boyfriend, and the young woman was not party to the proceeding because she was not on the lease. I successfully argued a motion to intervene on her behalf. After the motion hearing, another student and I went into mediation with the young woman, her landlord, and her landlord's attorney. We convinced the landlord to pay the young woman to leave the apartment in exchange for her agreeing to move out prior to the date set for trial. Without our help, she probably could not have moved out on her own terms and she certainly would not have received any money. That was a very satisfying day in court, both because of the result for the client and because of the chance to improve my oral advocacy and negotiation skills.

Overall, I had a great summer. I really enjoyed meeting the other students who worked at the bureau over the summer, as well as my supervisors. I learned many necessary lawyering skills and became more confident in my abilities. Most importantly, I helped some unfortunate people solve serious problems. Again, without the support of Equal Justice America, I would have missed out on all of it. Thank you for that support. I wish you continued success and I hope that you are able to continue to fund students working in the public interest long into the future.

Sincerely,

Gabriel Thornton
Suffolk University Law School class of 2008