

Allison Gill Sanford

August 25, 2017

Dan Ruben, Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 Boundary Rd, 204 B
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I want to sincerely thank you and everyone at EJA for providing me with summer funding for my legal internship. I had an overwhelmingly positive experience working with Arch City Defenders, an organization that focuses on legal advocacy for homeless, impoverished, and otherwise disenfranchised members of the greater St. Louis community. St. Louis has a fragmented municipal court system (90 plus small city courts in the greater St. Louis metro area) that function to extract fines and fees for the sole aim of generating revenue, often without providing due process to defendants. Arch City's central work is challenging the municipal courts; they provide direct representation to those caught up in this predatory system, and have filed class action suits to highlight and disincentivize the constitutional violations that are routinely committed by the municipalities.

In my time interning at Arch City, I was appalled by what I witnessed in municipal court. These courts are used to extracting payment from defendants, regardless of whether or not the defendant fully understands the ordinance violation of which they are accused. The municipal courts have functioned this way for so long that they are truly baffled by any challenge to their authority or operating procedures. Once when I requested a copy of our client's file from a municipal court, the clerk laughed at me and responded that she was not obligated to provide the record. It is obviously illegal to withhold that information from the defendant or the defendant's counsel. Nevertheless, this is the attitude of many of the municipal courts: they feel entitled to deprive our clients of their property and liberty without due process.

Some progress is being made to shift the municipal court model toward a constitutionally acceptable framework. These changes have largely resulted from suits brought by Arch City against the cities. I had the privilege of working on research for a response to a motion for summary judgment in one of the ongoing suits. It was very gratifying to contribute to that research. I learned more about specific claims, the litigation process, and how to construct arguments based on the policy rational underlying various legal doctrines. I feel that my legal research and writing skills increased significantly throughout the summer, and that I will be a better advocate when I graduate as a result.

In terms of direct client work, there is one case from the summer that I will carry with me for a long time. To me, the client had such a compelling story and it was infuriating to witness how he was treated by people in power. Furthermore, his story is symbolic of many others who are in similar situations. I will use a pseudonym below.

Mr. Gonzales was detained by ICE after being pulled over for a traffic violation. Arch City became involved with his case through a community resource center for immigrants, and we represented him at his bond hearing before an immigration judge. I worked extensively with my supervising attorney to prepare to petition the judge to grant Mr. Gonzales a reasonable bond so he could go home to his family. Our work on his behalf included requesting records of dispositions on municipal court charges¹, collecting affidavits from friends and family members who could attest to his character, and communicating with his wife. We hoped to demonstrate to the judge that there would be no public safety concern in releasing Mr. Gonzales while he waited for his immigration proceedings, which is the primary legal rationale for holding someone without bond. In my view, Mr. Gonzales was not a public safety threat, but the judge easily justified a narrative of danger based on the municipal violations on his record. During the hearing, I felt that I was witnessing the legal veneer that is so often applied to make an unjust decision look palatable in a country with purported respect for the rule of law. Interacting so much with Mr. Gonzales' friends and family made his case very real to me. It was very difficult for all of us when the judge denied our motion for a bond.

The heartbreaking reality is that Mr. Gonzales will likely be deported. He has a young daughter who is a citizen, and he has been the primary provider for her and his wife. Because we lost the bond hearing, he will stay in detention and might not see them again before he is made to leave the country.

This case was not a victory by any means. Insofar as it is anything more than a very sad everyday occurrence for undocumented communities, it is a lesson to me about the reality of legal aid. I believe that legal aid lawyers need to find meaning and purpose in the act of standing alongside someone in solidarity, because winning is unfortunately rare in a system stacked against your clients. We need to never resign ourselves to losing, but also learn to cope with it in order to stay in this line of work. This is hard for lawyers; we like to argue, we like to construct clever ideas, and we like to win by outsmarting the other side. But for legal aid lawyers, the merits of an argument can easily be undercut by other factors that cannot be controlled. Rather than centralizing ourselves, I think centralizing the experiences of our clients and how worthwhile it is to be in their corner is critical. I hope to be able to do that consistently in my work.

Again, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone at EJA for granting me this fellowship. My commitment to this kind of legal work has been strengthened by this opportunity.

All the Best,
Allison Gill Sanford
Harvard Law School
JD Candidate 2019

¹ For context, it is not uncommon for people living in St. Louis to have dozens of municipal charges; the fragmentation of the courts and the inane nature of the ordinance violations themselves makes it easy to collect tickets. Having the wrong blinds in your window, leaving the lid to your trash can popped up, or cutting across an empty parking lot can all result in an ordinance violation.

Thomas B. Harvey
Co-Founder,
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Michael-John Voss
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August 30, 2017

VIA EMAIL

Dan Ruben, Executive Director
Equal Justice America

Re: Allison Gill Sanford-Fellowship

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Allison was an intern with ArchCity Defenders this summer and I was her supervisor during her time here. Much of Allison's initial internship was spent shadowing me as I met with clients. Our clients' obstacles range from fragmented family relationships, persistent unemployment, repeated involvement in the criminal justice system, and homelessness. From the time she entered our doors, Allison understood our office's commitment and approach to holistic advocacy when addressing our clients' needs. She seemed to have the immediate ability to develop rapport with clients and, in turn, they took an instant liking to her. For example, one unbearably hot morning, Allison and I were walking back from court and we met an elderly gentleman. We were both concerned about his ability to withstand the extreme temperatures, so we escorted him back to the office. After providing him with much needed water and talking to him about his situation, he became our client. Since Allison completed her internship, this client has asked about Allison and remarked how she seemed like a wonderful person. This is someone who only met Allison a few times, yet her presence and desire to assist him was impactful.

Allison's internship later transitioned to more hands-on work which included drafting memorandums, writing a motion to set aside a judgment, and researching case law. She also accompanied me to the local homeless shelter, where we conducted weekly intakes and assessments of legal needs. Allison's ability to engage with clients, and her willingness to ask follow-up questions, assisted in making her a better, more informed legal writer. She was a pleasure to have as an intern and I have no doubt she will flourish in her career.



If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 855-724-2489 x. 1033.

Sincerely,

Nicole D. Nelson

Nicole D. Nelson

Staff Attorney

ArchCity Defenders

