

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to work at one of Chicago's best legal assistance organizations, LAF. During my time at LAF, I have not only gained crucial legal work experience, but I have also been able to dedicate my summer to helping women in need who lack equal access to the justice system.

I interned in the Children & Families Practice Group at LAF, doing work that primarily consisted of helping with divorce, parentage, and order of protection cases. I have been able to observe court proceedings, learn a great deal about trial procedure and motion practice, conduct legal research on fascinating areas of family law, and engage with clients through intake interviews and meetings. Not only that, but I have had the opportunity to work on interesting legal issues. For example, I engaged in forensic accounting for one client, searching through her husband's business checking account records to determine his true unreported income. I also did research into family law civil procedure, to determine if an agreed order for joint custody was valid if the parties never agreed to a full and final custody arrangement. These projects at LAF have given me a wide variety of legal experience I know will be valuable later in my legal career.

The best part of working at LAF, however, was the impact I feel I made in many clients' lives. One thing I learned about family law is that when a client goes through a divorce, it can often feel like the world is crashing down around them. Often, the client's standard of living is all of a sudden cut in half, and she must deal with the possibility of losing her home or rental property, navigate the complicated world of applying for public benefits, and figure out how to pay for her children's expenses. In an abusive situation, getting out of the relationship is just the start of the client's problems, as often an abusive spouse will attempt to control and manipulate every aspect of the divorce process.

However, the lawyers and law students at LAF are able to step in and help a client in this most difficult and scary of times. By just offering legal help, LAF attorneys can help put a client on an equal footing with her abusive and manipulative former partner, as well as provide referrals to outside organizations that can help with all of the extraneous details of setting up a new life. I was both humbled and privileged to have the opportunity to help provide this legal relief to many clients, but two clients in particular stand out to me as examples of why we do the work we do and why LAF is so important to the Chicago community. I have changed the clients' names to protect their privacy.

Stacy was badly abused by her former husband for many years, often in the presence of her children. After a particularly bad incident of physical abuse, she escaped—leaving her home with nothing but the clothes on her back. She began staying with her sister, in a crowded apartment with 3 adults and 3 children. Stacy had no money, no job, and no way out. She came to us, and I met with her for her intake appointment. I immediately sensed her desperate need, not only for resources, but for a way out of her toxic marriage.

I presented Stacy's case to attorneys in our practice group, and they agreed. I was able to draft all of her dissolution of marriage documents, but the best part was when I got to call her to let her know we were going to help her find her way out. Not only were we able to file for a divorce for Stacy, but we were able to get her plugged into LAF's Public Benefits Practice Group so she could apply for public assistance,

and refer her to LAF's Medical Debt Relief Project so she could get the \$5,000 she owed in hospital bills covered by Illinois Charity Care. Stacy has a long way to go in her divorce, but she is now on the right track to both financial and emotional stability.

I met with Gina for her intake appointment, and could tell that her situation was deeply complicated. Gina's husband had filed for divorce several weeks prior, and without warning, moved out and taken their six year old son with him. He moved in with a girlfriend, and the two of them began raising the son as their own—they switched him to a new summer day camp and refused to let Gina spend time with him. Gina was perfectly happy to get a divorce—her husband had been very physically and emotionally abusive over the years. However, she was desperate to see her son again. Gina had always been her son's primary caretaker, and her husband had never expressed any concerns with her mothering abilities up until now.

LAF took Gina's case, and I drafted her initial pleadings, as well as a motion for temporary relief to ask for her son to be returned to her possession. However, we had an uphill battle—Gina had struggled with alcoholism for many years as a coping mechanism for her husband's abuse. She had several felony records and was currently in court-ordered substance abuse treatment. I and the attorney supervising me worried that the court would take one look at Gina's record and rule that her son was in a more stable environment with his father. We knew that Gina was serious about her recovery, and serious about being a good mother to her son, but we knew that on paper, it would be difficult to convince a judge. But we forged ahead—and in fact, we were able to get the opposing counsel to agree to visitation, which they had previously denied. Gina is still fighting for custody, but as each day passes, she has more time sober, and we believe she will one day be reunited with her son.

Being able to watch the progression of a case such as Stacy's and Gina's from the beginning has been an invaluable experience for me. I have been able to witness these clients' anxiety and desperation when they first come in, and then watch as they gain confidence and the strength to fight for a fair and just outcome from their divorces. Clients go from a place where their lives are falling apart to a place where they can feel optimistic about their futures and their children's futures. Working at LAF in particular has been fantastic because we have the resources to not only help clients with their divorce and custody cases, but also to refer them to other attorneys within the agency who help them on a wide variety of related legal issues, such as homeownership, employment, public benefits, medical debt, and consumer fraud.

The people I have worked with at LAF have also made my time here invaluable. Coming to work every day to meet with people who have such a strong passion for legal services has inspired me to go into legal services myself one day. The lawyers at LAF are extremely knowledgeable in their practice areas, and are always willing to give advice and lessons on what they know. As a result, I have learned about much more than family law—I have gotten crash courses in pensions and retirement accounts, tax law, the Affordable Care Act, foreclosure law, and much more. But more than that, I have been honored and excited to come to work every day with people who dedicate their time to equal access to the justice system, and making sure that every person has a fair shot in court. I hope to return to legal services work so I can one day join these fantastic people in their hard work and concern for the particular legal issues faced by those in poverty.

Best wishes,



Hannah Lazar

J.D. Candidate, 2016

University of Chicago Law School



Equal justice starts here.

August 15, 2014

Dan Ruben, Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
c/o [Katie@equaljusticeamerica.org](mailto:Katie@equaljusticeamerica.org)

Re: Hannah Lazar, 2014 Summer Intern

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am writing to you to give you my thoughts and opinions regarding Ms. Lazar. She interned at our agency this summer in our Children and Family Practice Group. In particular, she worked with me and four other attorneys, all of whom handle domestic violence, custody, and divorce cases on behalf of low-income clients who are otherwise unable to afford legal representation.

Hannah has been a true asset to our group. Her work over the summer consisted of interviewing prospective clients, drafting pleadings, and researching assorted legal issues. During this time, she honed her interview abilities each time that she met with a client. She is courteous, professional, and skilled in her interviews and able to obtain the necessary information from the client. In addition to assigned interviews, she filled in several times to interview clients when the scheduled attorney was unable to see the client. After each interview, she presented the case at our staff meeting in a clear, concise, and organized fashion. Where necessary, she followed up with clients to obtain further information or to advise the client.

Hannah also assisted in drafting numerous pleadings. She drafted initial divorce petitions, counter-petitions, judgments, and marital settlement agreements. She helped me personally early in the summer by reading through a lengthy custody evaluation and preparing a summary of the pertinent points and recommendations of the evaluator.

Every summer intern usually helps with research memos and Hannah's help in this area was again excellent. Her research memos included the topics of determining whether property is marital when purchased in contemplation of marriage, whether a spouse can dissipate a future and speculative award of money, and the enforceability of a custody order that lacks details regarding the parents' rights and responsibilities. Her memos were well written, concise, and provided excellent guidance on the specific legal issues.

Although she does not currently have a Rule 711 license to appear in court, we made sure she attended court hearings on cases where she was involved. This enabled her to see how important her work is for our clients and our staff.

In sum, she was a wonderful asset for our agency and our group this summer. We have all enjoyed working with her and we will miss her excellent help. Please feel free to contact me if you need further information. I have listed my contact information below.

Sincerely,



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