

August 23, 2012

Dan Ruben
Executive Director at Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Before law school, I worked as a paralegal at two public interest agencies in Oakland, CA and Chicago, IL. I knew before the first day of my 1L year that I wanted to pursue a career in public interest law. However, Equal Justice America's funding made interning at LAF (Legal Assistance Foundation) in Chicago this summer financially an option for me, which increased my likelihood of "sticking with it." No matter how dedicated I am to public interest law, if I can't afford groceries I'll be forced to find other employment opportunities. Thanks in part to EJA I was able make new strides in my legal education this summer while advocating on behalf of some of our societies most marginalized individuals.

This summer I worked with the Children and Family Law practice group at LAF on divorces, parentage cases, and other issues surrounding domestic violence. The vast majority of our clientele were survivors of domestic abuse and mothers.

I had the privilege of stepping up in court to represent a woman whose abusive husband had stabbed her with a kitchen knife- let's call her Alma. I was honored to represent Alma in the last stages of her divorce. Although I was the one drafting the documents, preparing her for her final court date, and speaking to Court on her behalf, it was Alma whose strength and determination drove the case. So many of my clients demonstrated this same courage in the face of adversity, which inspired me daily. Even if I was nervous to step up in court, brave clients like Alma helped make me strong and confident.

I was not always the lead advocate on cases, but even in a support role I learned much about the law and the human spirit. My supervising attorneys always made sure to answer any questions I had while in court or back at the office. They also did not hesitate to give me challenging research or drafting assignments that kept me on my toes. For example, I was able to research an internal memo on parental child abduction to help the agency accurately advise survivors of domestic violence who wish to flee with their children from an abuser. Such flight can easily result in criminal charges of child abduction against the parent who flees. However, steps can be taken to minimize this risk. I found it so rewarding to see my newly minted legal research skills being put to practical use for the common good.

Thank you, Equal Justice America, for helping me follow my dream of helping others to protect themselves, their children and their legal rights!

Sincerely,

Jessica Rhoades
University of Illinois College of Law
Class of 2013