

August 30, 2015

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
Building II – Suite 204 13450 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I spent ten weeks this summer at the Bronx Defenders in Bronx, New York. I interned with the Civil Action Practice (CAP), which provides a wide array of civil legal services to clients and their families. The CAP attorneys and legal advocates provide comprehensive services in an integrated team model, working with the Family Defense and Criminal Defense practices to address the enmeshed penalties of involvement in criminal and family court proceedings. Contact with the criminal justice system can have far-reaching effects in a person's life, including disastrous consequences for her housing, employment, immigration, and public benefits status.

Before spending my summer at the Bronx Defenders, I knew that I wanted to provide direct legal services to indigent people and other vulnerable populations. I came to law school with this commitment, and I entered into my summer sure I would maintain this commitment. After completing my summer with CAP, my dedication to providing direct legal services was reaffirmed. However, I also developed a deeper interest in and commitment to providing holistic, strengths-based legal advocacy, particularly as this advocacy seeks to address the web of consequences that result from contact with the criminal justice system.

What struck me during my time at the Bronx Defenders is the extent to which the multitude of legal and non-legal obstacles faced by indigent communities and communities of color are inter-related and mutually reinforcing. For example, an arrest that doesn't even result in a charge or a conviction can trigger a security guard license suspension. This loss in income, however temporary, can lead someone to fall behind on his or her rent, which can result in eviction. Homelessness may lead to child protective services becoming involved, and then a parent might find him or herself facing termination of parental rights and removal of children from custody. All of this could result from an arrest. It might not— but it could. This is not an uncommon or unlikely scenario, and this is the reality that communities in the Bronx face every single day.

During my internship, I performed a variety of tasks to support the goal of providing holistic advocacy to clients in the Bronx, including research, writing motions, and interviewing clients. For example, my supervisor and I met with one client, Mr. S, to listen to his story and assess how we could help. Mr. S had been arrested for allegedly selling drugs in his apartment building. Under the "Bawdy House" laws, the district attorney's office had essentially required that Mr. S's landlord commence eviction proceedings against him for the operation of an illegal business or trade based in his

residence. Mr. S, who is disabled and deals with daily chronic pain, faces poverty and struggles with addiction, but he had not been operating a drug dealing business out of his apartment. He expressed his desire to remain in his apartment and be “left alone,” to be allowed to live in peace. His daily experience was one of surveillance and intrusion by multiple systems— whether it was the property manager of his building or the police officer patrolling his street.

Most people in Mr. S’s position will not have access to affordable or competent legal assistance. There is no right to counsel in housing court. Yet this assistance is crucial for increasing the likelihood of remaining housed. After listening to Mr. S’s story and reviewing his file, including the criminal case documents, the eviction notice, and the housing court petition, I researched and wrote a motion to dismiss on procedural grounds. Though I was not able to argue the motion myself in court, I helped prep and then observed a CAP attorney argue the motion before the housing court judge. The result is still pending. I spoke with Mr. S in person or on the phone each week during my internship. Each time we spoke, Mr. S expressed his frustration with his circumstances, but also his gratitude to me and to the Bronx Defenders. He remained optimistic and patient despite the injustice of his situation, and this motivated me in my own work. I don’t know what will happen in Mr. S’s case, but I know that it was incredibly important for CAP to be there to explain his complex legal situation, present his options and help him evaluate them, and zealously advocate for his rights and for his goals.

Working with Mr. S and other clients was a privilege. I am grateful that they shared their stories with me and trusted me to advocate for them on their behalf. I am grateful I was able to work in the Bronx this summer, and I would not have been able to live and work in New York City without the support of the Equal Justice America fellowship grant. Thank you so much for your support.

Sincerely,

Julia Popkin
NYU School of Law
Class of 2017

Dear Mr. Dan Ruben,

I was the supervisor for law student Julia Popkin, an intern with The Bronx Defenders this summer. Julia became an indispensable part of the Civil Action Practice (CAP) in her tenure as an intern.

This was a notable accomplishment given the volume and complexity of intersectional legal issues CAP deals with. Julia has an astute legal mind and produced excellent written products in every task she performed. From vital client advocacy to carrying out research and writing motions for complex litigation, Julia created sophisticated legal work. Julia also cares deeply about the dignity of all people. Consequently, she sees the law as an antidote for injustice. She seems fueled by a genuine devotion to justice initiatives and honest compassion for clients.

Julia is also critical thinker and deftly breaks down dense legal concepts in her writing. Her legal research is strong and exhaustive. Her legal writing is of very high caliber in both form and substance. She produced a lot of outstanding work this summer, so it is hard to list all of them. Some highlights include:

- She carefully researched and wrote written summations for a disabled and indigent non-custodial parent in a child support proceeding.
- She researched and wrote a persuasive Bronx Housing Court motion (and reply) to dismiss a summary drug holdover proceeding for a disabled tenant, due to procedural defects and jurisdictional defenses. This motion was subsequently granted and the case dismissed!
- She researched and wrote advocacy for a heroic single mother whose two young adult sons were cruelly permanently excluded from their NYCHA public housing apartment;
- She interviewed clients, drafted materials and assisted in miscellaneous aspects of research, advocacy and litigation.

Not once did Julia fail to exceed expectations. She is also highly professional and while I supervised her closely, I trusted her greatly. She was punctual, displayed respect for the office and our clients and helped raise our profile in every setting. The zeal she brings to her legal work is coupled nicely with a warm gentleness and good will for those around her. She seemed impacted by her work in the Bronx and revealed deep respect for the struggles of our clients.

Do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions regarding the work of Julia Popkin.

Very best wishes,
Christa Douaihy, Esq.
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