

August 31, 2016

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
Building II, Suite 204  
13540 East Boundary Road  
Middlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you to everyone at Equal Justice America who made it possible for me to serve as a student attorney at Harvard Legal Aid Bureau (“HLAB”) during my summer after my 2L year. There was no other experience that could have provided me with such a truthful look at the awesome work of public interest lawyers. My time working to provide direct legal services to underserved individuals and families in the greater Boston area was both fulfilling and heartbreaking in equal measure – two inexorable feelings that go hand in hand with truly serving the downtrodden.

As a Latina immigrant born into struggle and the first of my family to attend college, it has been difficult for me to ask for aid, especially for the financial support to join such a rigorous and prestigious organization as HLAB. What I quickly found was that the fellowship offered by Equal Justice America is so much more than financial support: it is an investment in students who demonstrate the passion and potential to unlock incredible feats of strength and skill to be a legal shoulder to lean on for vulnerable persons in times of great uncertainty.

Harvard Legal Aid Bureau and Equal Justice America alike believed in me and inspired me to believe in myself, despite my own personal fears. Specifically, HLAB believed in me enough to greet me with over 10 cases in the areas of housing rights, government benefits, and immigration. Make no mistake, being in court on my fourth day was incredibly intimidating, but, such a trial by fire ingrained in me the realization that, in public interest advocacy, there is no time for anything less than a full-throated effort and the flexibility to continually learn on the fly.

I gained experience quickly, became more efficient, and began to see effectiveness in my approaches to cases. I was encouraged to use my humility and humanity as a strength in order to offer temporary comforts to clients facing eviction, and to harness my frustration with profound unfairness into additional reserves of strength and energy to continue working when I thought I had no more to give. For example, in many areas of Boston, neighborhoods are gentrifying rapidly. A buyer under the guise of individual LLCs bearing the name of the particular address of each purchased property buy up as many properties as possible, with the aim of evicting every family inside, the vast majority of whom are low income, working Latinos. The buildings are renovated and remarketed, either as condos or as trendy student housing. HLAB, along with City Life Vida Urbana, has been leading the effort to track down where these purchases are happening so the tenants are aware of their rights and do not leave without exercising all available remedies.

While my skills in preparing for and executing litigation grew so did the nature of work. At least once a week I traveled to East-Boston to serve as “attorney for the day” to an ad hoc community centered legal outreach effort. While I was excited to regain the opportunity to speak Spanish regularly, as I had feared that I was losing some of my fluency, I was deeply wounded knowing that the scared mothers and fathers whom I was talking to, who were doing everything within their power to provide their children with stability, were facing homelessness, oftentimes because of underhanded tactics which preyed upon language and power inequalities that left them economically vulnerable and fearful to have a voice. I was reminded how easily this could have been me, and I was reminded how public interest is much more than service, it is a duty of those wishing to see “equal justice under the law” actualized.

But, I also learned valuable tactical lessons. “Winning” in court is not always a *win* for the client. Going to trial and successfully arguing a legal claim may only result in a client receiving a few more weeks before an eviction is completed. Sometimes finding mutual interests and using that framework can produce a negotiated settlement far outweighing the gains available at trial.

I must admit I cried . . . a lot. I cried out of exhaustion when I did not know what else to provide my clients. I cried out of empathy knowing how frightening my client’s situations were. I cried out of anger when opposing counsel made subtle comments designed to make me feel less than a peer because I was a young Latina.

On roughly my last day of my fellowship, I was begrudgingly typing a transfer memo on a case that I had been working on from day one, where a low-income client was refused proper payment for construction work. A colleague entered the room and told me, “Monica, that wage-hour case you were working on all summer, we just received a check in the mail, congratulations you can notify your client.” I did. My client was elated and so relieved.

I cried. I had made a difference.

Sincerely,

/s/

Monica Macias  
J.D. Candidate, 2017  
Michigan State University College of Law