

Margaret McWhorter

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August 28, 2014

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This past summer, thanks to the Equal Justice America Fellowship I was able to intern with the Chicago Legal Clinic. I worked in the Austin office which primarily handles criminal record and family law cases. Throughout the summer I had the opportunity to assist clients in both of these areas.

In the criminal records division I interviewed clients for clemency petitions, filled out sealing and expungement petitions, and every Thursday afternoon I went to the criminal courthouse to provide free representation to people going before the court to petition for their criminal records to be sealed, partially sealed, or expunged. Thursday afternoons were some of the most hectic but exciting and fulfilling days. I would typically step up with four to five clients each week and help them explain to the court why they need their criminal records sealed. Drugs crimes were the most pervasive offenses, and the man who stays in my mind the most was no exception.

I interviewed John for approximately 15 minutes and found out that he had over 50 arrests and convictions dating back to the 1960s. Most of his crimes were for drug offenses and loitering, although he was charged with some violent crimes in the 1970s. John's drug offenses were due to him trying to self-medicate the voices he was hearing. Once John was diagnosed with schizophrenia and began taking prescription medication, his run-ins with the law dropped considerably. John needed his eligible offenses sealed so he would be eligible for senior housing, because for the past several years he had been living in motels and shelters. I asked him what he did during the day and he said that he mostly stayed in the park and kept to himself. While John's story was compelling, he was not able to articulate it in the most coherent fashion,

and that's where I came in. I was able to speak on John's behalf and highlight the most important parts of his story. John got all his eligible offenses sealed, and I hope that he finally got on a waiting list for senior housing and will not have too many more nights in motels ahead of him.

As I mentioned above, the Chicago Legal Clinic's Austin office also handles family law cases, including those involving domestic violence. Throughout the summer I interviewed five women who were seeking legal assistance to obtain civil orders of protection. The first woman I interviewed was seeking an order of protection from the father of her child. The father of her child had threatened to kill her and the child, he had attempted to run her car off the road, and recently, she believed, he sent a woman to her home to try and kidnap the child. We were not able to help this woman get all the relief from the court she requested (her abuser was still allowed to see their child), but we were able to extend her order of protection so he could not contact her and the child exchanges were to take place with an intermediary. This case sticks in my mind because it helped me come to terms with the simple fact that you cannot win every case but you can do your best to help your client and get them to a better place than they were in when they came to you.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my summer at the Chicago Legal Clinic, and I plan to continue to intern with them in the fall. I am thankful to the Equal Justice America Fellowship for making the decision to intern with a non-profit an easy one.

Sincerely,

Margaret McWhorter

*Juris Doctor Candidate May 2015*

The John Marshall Law School