

Mary L. Shelly Mageski

August 27, 2013

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

When I started my internship this summer, I was terrified. I knew that I wanted to help people in my community, but I did not know where to start. I had no idea what would be expected of me. Even scarier, I felt like I did not know enough about the law to actually be able to help this organization. Don't get me wrong: I learned a great deal in my first year of law school, but I remember feeling that I had learned very little that would prepare me for what I was about to do. Thankfully this was not entirely true, though I will admit that it was difficult at first. The learning curve was steep, and at times it was easy to feel overwhelmed.

Thankfully, the attorneys and legal assistants who worked with me this summer at Legal Services of South Central Michigan are all great teachers. Each person has very different sets of skills, and it was so useful to me to be able to see them all in action. Some are great at being comforting and compassionate ears to our clients. Some are great at thinking on their feet in the heat of the moment. Some are great writers. Some are great at remembering facts, rules, regulations, and statutes. Some are great at tough love (when necessary). Some are great diplomats. Some are great negotiators. Some are simply great teachers. One thing they all have in common, though, is that they care. They care about our clients, they care about each other, and they care about their work. It was a privilege for me to work with and learn from each and every one of them.

So bit by bit, week by week, I learned. I discovered what all those acronyms stand for and memorized the vast new vocabulary I needed to have at my disposal. I learned how to communicate with our clients and more importantly I learned how to listen to them. I learned how to work with other attorneys and attorneys-in-training. I picked up the basics of how to negotiate: with my supervising attorneys, with our clients, with opposing counsel. I learned to be watchful and to listen. I discovered that when you go to court you need to have a plan, but you have to be ready to make a new plan on the fly. I learned that I know more than I think I do, and I learned that I have so much more to learn.

I also learned that sometimes it is easy to care about our clients and sometimes it is a challenge. One of the first cases given to me when I started at Legal Services was a case regarding public benefits for a client who, as it turns out, would work with me throughout my entire internship. She was often confused about what was happening and why those things were happening to her. She initially called us because she was experiencing a lot of difficulty regarding the benefits that she and her family were eligible to receive from the Michigan Department of Human Services. This situation was a complicated puzzle, and her relationship with her caseworker was very strained, so she relied on me to help her work with DHS to get these problems sorted out. Each problem required a lot of research, some calculation, and extensive

communication with DHS. Even after all that work I was never really sure if what I was doing was helping her situation. This was often very frustrating to me, and to her.

This meant that our relationship was a multifaceted one. Sometimes she seemed happy and grateful to be working with me, and other times I could tell that she saw me as just another layer of bureaucracy preventing her from getting the help she needed to take care of her family. She would bring in towering, disorganized stacks of documents in the hopes that we could make sense of them for her. She would call every few days to find out what we were doing for her and she would not hesitate to tell me if she thought we were not doing enough. I recall one particularly memorable phone call during which she accused me of not being committed enough to helping her. She snapped that it must be nice to be able to go to my comfortable home at the end of the day and not have to deal with these kinds of problems when five o'clock rolled around. It felt like a slap across the face. And I felt awful because of course she was right. It really was nice to go home at five and not have to think about her problems, and I do have a comfortable home and supportive family to go home to. She lives these problems every moment of her life, and for a while I felt awfully guilty about that. I dreaded her phone calls for a while and buried myself in the growing pile of more urgent cases on my desk. But then I realized that how I felt should not matter. It will not help her for me to simply feel guilty. She needed help, and I had committed to provide her with as much help as I could give.

The event that triggered this particular outburst was a notification that one of her benefits had been terminated. So I reached out to her caseworker's supervisor to find out what was going on and he discovered that the benefit had been terminated in error. He reinstated the benefit for her pending a hearing decision. It was as simple as that! I was finally able to call her with some good news and she was so grateful and appreciative. This one victory was only a small piece of her complicated puzzle, but it was a step in the right direction and it meant the world to her in that moment. I do not know what the resolution will be for this particular client because I had to give this case back to my supervising attorney in-progress, but I feel so grateful to have been able to help her, even just a little. I'm also greatly appreciative to her for what she taught me about what it takes to be a legal aid attorney.

I'm so grateful to have received a fellowship from Equal Justice America. Without it, I might never have had the opportunity to take this internship and I might never have learned how committed I am to providing legal services to low-income people in my community. There is so much need, and I want to help. Now, thanks to everything that I learned this summer, I know where to start. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mary L. Shelly Mageski
The University of Michigan Law School
Expected Graduation Date: May 2015