

August 7, 2013

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

My experience as an Equal Justice America fellow this summer has been nothing short of incredible. As an intern at the Paso del Norte Civil Rights Project in El Paso, Texas, I learned more about civil rights, economic justice, civil litigation, the Violence Against Women Act and the law in general than I ever thought possible and I emerge from this experience a more focused, determined, and knowledgeable law student. I look forward to translating what I have learned through practical experience into my law school classes and clinical work and am very pleased to find myself more determined than ever before to pursue a career in public interest law, specifically in civil rights and/or economic justice.

One of the best aspects of my internship experience at Paso del Norte was the wide variety of cases I was involved in as well as the large array of legal writing and projects I was able to complete. In addition to this, I was able to observe and take part in a variety of legal proceedings, meetings, and trainings that taught me even more about the law, litigation, client contact, and nonprofit legal organizations.

As a law clerk at Paso Del Norte Civil Rights Project, I was involved in each of the three branches of the organization; civil rights, economic justice, and VAWA (Violence Against Women Act). With the civil rights branch, our main project as law clerks was the annual Americans with Disabilities Act campaign, which focuses on demanding ADA compliance from local businesses which have changed or altered their premises in the last 20 years. Throughout this campaign, we worked closely with local disability rights organizations who sent us the names of businesses where their members had difficulties accessing services. With this information, we conducted investigations of the businesses, sent letters to them detailing their ADA violations, and later drafted petitions if those letters went unanswered.

In addition to this work, I was able to work closely with a case regarding the denial of a sign language interpreter to a deaf plaintiff at court over a variety of appointments. With this case, I met with the plaintiff on a number of occasions, drafted the original petition for the lawsuit, and filed the case in federal court. My work with this particular plaintiff was probably the most fulfilling and incredible experience of the entire summer. The plaintiff was a young mother in her early 20s who was wholly deaf and had been her entire life. Despite her disability, the woman had lived a very successful and fulfilling life. She had recently graduated from high school and is currently taking classes at the local community college in order to become a therapist. She is a full-time mother to her 14-month-old child and is in charge of her care. The plaintiff had attended the district court as a result of ongoing abuse she suffered at the hands of her child's father, and she was there seeking a Restraining Order. This entire process was likely very traumatic for her in general, especially given the lack of interpretation provided to her by the court.

The plaintiff communicates in American Sign Language and relies on interpretation wherever she goes in order to fully understand what goes on around her. My first meeting with this client was completely fascinating. It was awe-inspiring to see the dynamic between her, her mother (who is not fluent in American Sign Language, speaks and writes only Spanish, and herself is partially deaf) and her young child. Her mother interpreted for her as we explained the case and the legal proceedings to follow. In addition to speaking about the case and what the process would look like, the plaintiff's mother also explained their ongoing fight for proper accommodations and equal treatment for her daughter, faced at many institutions throughout her life. Not being familiar with the deaf community and the struggles they face myself, it was incredibly eye-opening to hear everything faced by this woman and was inspiring to see her perseverance and willingness to fight for these rights on behalf of the entire deaf community.

At the culmination of the campaign, our office in conjunction with the disability rights organizations held a press conference at our office on the day before the anniversary of the passage of the ADA to announce these lawsuits and make the El Paso community aware of the seriousness of the violations of this important Act. At the press conference, accompanied by a certified American Sign Language interpreter, our plaintiff spoke to news stations, newspapers and other media with all the confidence in the world, sharing her story with the hope that this would mean change for the entire deaf community of El Paso and surrounding areas. It was incredible to see her confidence and determination as she spoke and I felt lucky to have had the chance to work with such an amazing individual. This entire project was a lot of work but was extremely fulfilling and an excellent learning experience. Our plaintiff and her family expressed their gratitude towards us for taking their case, helping them with this important issue, and for all of our hard work.

In addition to our ADA campaign, I also worked on a civil rights case filed against a detention facility that held plaintiffs passed the required time period and denied their family members' attempts to post bond. After filing this case, our attorneys were served with a motion to dismiss from the defendants. As a result, we were tasked with answering different portions of this motion, which included conducting extensive legal research, exploring the relevant case law, drafting memoranda for the attorneys, and drafting portions of the answer. With this project, I drafted a response to the defendant's Motion to Stay Discovery, which was filed with the response to the defendant's Motion to Dismiss as well as a portion of the Response to defendant's Motion to Dismiss itself.

As a part of the economic justice branch of the organization, I took part in the Labor Justice Committee meetings that occurred every Tuesday night. This committee is a community-based organization that uses community-organizing tactics to recover lost wages for local employees and works to combat wage theft in the area. At these meetings, I met with members and clients regarding their cases, listened to presentations, and offered support to members. It was at these meetings that I met with clients regarding a lien case that I was working on. In this particular case, clients were subcontracted by a building company to complete work to a housing development owned by the contractors. The subcontracting company had refused to pay clients after two weeks of substantial labor on the houses. In order to combat this nonpayment of owed wages, we sent a lien notice to both the contractor and subcontractor that stated that should clients not be paid their owed wages by a certain time, we would file a lien with the court on the houses on which clients had worked. After filing this notice, we stayed in touch with the clients about the progress of the case and both clients attended the Labor Justice Committee meetings weekly, eager to both hear any news regarding their case as well as to support other members with their own wage claims. A few weeks before the end of my internship, we heard from the contractors

who agreed to send checks to clients for the labor furnished on the houses they earned. This was a huge victory for the Committee and for our clients, whose hard labor would not go unappreciated.

Finally, I also helped in the VAWA branch of the organization. With this branch, I helped victims of domestic violence with their immigrant petitions through the Violence Against Women Act as well as through U Visa applications. Our office focuses on assisting women who lived in more rural parts of Texas where legal aid is difficult to come by or nonexistent. It was with the VAWA branch that I came into contact with my U Visa client who lived in Midland, Texas and was applying for a U Visa as a victim of a crime at the hands of her ex-husband, who had consistently abused her throughout their relationship. Though I never met this client and all of our correspondence was over the phone or through the mail, it was an incredible experience to work with a woman who had been through so much terror and violence and had such strength to do what was best for her family and her children, agreeing to assist in the investigation of the crime in order to obtain such immigration benefits that she sought. Though this meant writing detailed declarations and contacting the police department in her area to gain information, my client was willing to re-live the nightmare she had gone through in order to receive the immigration benefits she knew would help her family enormously. As a single mother supporting 6 children and one grandchild, her situation was extremely difficult and her strength was incredibly awe-inspiring. I was so impressed with the speed at which she returned requested documents, her thoroughness in all of her letters and documentation, and her eagerness and willingness to stay in touch and to do whatever necessary to get the application in as soon as possible despite her numerous other pressing obligations to do with her family.

At the end of my internship, I spoke to this client and let her know that my time at the organization was ending and that another paralegal would be taking on her case from that point forward. It was both fulfilling and saddening to hear the disappointment in her voice and was extremely gratifying to hear her thank me for all of the work I had done on her case and the help that I had provided. While I felt that I had learned more from her strength and perseverance than anything I could ever provide her with, it was so nice to hear her gratitude and was the perfect culmination of my work on her case and the relationship we had formed through our consistent correspondence.

In addition to my work on immigrant petitions for victims of domestic violence, I also conducted legal research and put together memoranda for the VAWA team on new immigration policies to do with the Act, including Voluntary Departure, Bars of Inadmissibility, and Waivers of Grounds of Inadmissibility. This research was extremely interesting and I was happy to have the opportunity to practice legal writing to a very specific aspect of the law such as Immigration. Additionally, it was nice to see how grateful the VAWA team was to have this new information for their future reference, especially given the ever-changing practice of Immigration Law and its many nuances.

I feel extremely lucky to have had the opportunity to work at such an incredible organization where I was able to take part in such a wide variety of projects and complete such an array of assignments that taught me more than I ever thought possible. What made this experience an even better one was the gratification that comes with assisting those in legal matters who may not otherwise have access to legal services. This internship has certainly convinced me that a future in public interest law is definitely for me and I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to discover this.

Lastly, I would like to thank the Equal Justice America Fellowship for making this summer internship possible for me and for all of their support throughout. I am truly grateful for everything.

Sincerely,

Megan McCormick

Suffolk University Law School 2015