

August 11, 2011

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer I had the opportunity to work at the Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee (LASM), a non-profit legal aid clinic, thanks to the support I received from an Equal Justice America fellowship.

LASM has been providing free legal services to the Milwaukee community since 1916. Prior to beginning my internship, I assumed that LASM had been founded in the 1960s as part of the Great Society movement. I was surprised to learn that LASM was actually founded much earlier, as part of a pre-World War I push for low-cost legal services, particularly for the many immigrants who populated Milwaukee at that time. For over 80 years, LASM has not only survived, but grown from a few attorneys and several social workers to two large offices in the Milwaukee area, staffed by over 20 attorneys and lots of support staff. I was inspired by LASM's ability to continue providing quality legal representation, even in the current harsh economic and political climate that has resulted in drastic reductions in funding for these vital services.

I worked primarily with the Advocacy for Low Income Neighborhood Equity (A-line) team. This group of five attorneys works to provide civil legal representation to combat predatory lending practices related to home equity loans. While this program has existed for 20 or more years, the A-line team has expanded in recent years in light of the current foreclosure crisis. In a number of ways, A-line helps homeowners who are at risk of losing their home to foreclosure. First, if a homeowner has a legal defense, the A-line team litigates the case, often bringing to light egregious problems with the securitization of the mortgage and note. Second, if the homeowner does not have a legal defense to the foreclosure, an A-line attorney will still help the homeowner with mediation in an attempt to get a loan modification so that the homeowner may retain their home with a reduced monthly mortgage payment.

I worked with both the litigation and mediation programs. On the litigation side, I researched a number of complex issues, particularly regarding the requirements of a valid mortgage assignment and promissory note conveyance. Based on my research, I prepared several memoranda for the litigating attorneys. I also had the opportunity to meet with mediation clients to help them prepare for mediation, and attended several mediations with homeowners.

While my work at LASM was primarily with the A-line team, I also got to experience the other legal practice areas that LASM provides. In my second week on the job, I prepared a presentation entitled “Discharging Income Tax in Bankruptcy” for the staff bankruptcy attorney. This was a difficult task because bankruptcy is an extremely complex area of law, and I have not taken any courses on this topic. The attorney used my presentation for a meeting at the Milwaukee State Bar-Tax Attorney chapter meeting. I was extremely satisfied with this project because while bankruptcy knowledge is vital in poverty law, there are few low cost or no cost legal clinics that offer assistance in this area.

I also got to participate in LASM’s outreach efforts. Every week, LASM attorneys staff a walk in clinic at a local meals program for Milwaukee’s homeless population. I helped an attorney at several of these weekly clinics. Those using the walk-in services most frequently had questions regarding municipal citations and upcoming court dates. I learned a great deal from these clinics, because I had never dealt with municipal issues before.

Finally, to a lesser degree I was also able to observe LASM’s guardian ad litem (GAL) practice and its small claims assistance program. In Wisconsin, GALs must be licensed attorneys. I attended several GAL hearings with the attorney, and was able to talk to her at length about the challenges of this kind of work. This was interesting because I had never considered this practice area for my own future career, and had little knowledge about GAL work. Additionally, I had the opportunity to help one attorney with an eviction proceeding in which our client, the tenant, was likely being evicted for retaliatory reasons. This hearing took place in the Milwaukee County Small Claims Court, which is a confusing and unkind court to navigate because of the volume of cases the small claims court handles.

Overall, I think my internship at LASM was a valuable experience because I got to experience a number of practice areas, all of which help clients living in poverty. Additionally, I got to be a part of a close-knit team of dedicated professionals who enjoy their work and provide invaluable legal services to Milwaukee’s low-income population. I am happy I got to experience working in this kind of environment, and my experience at LASM will certainly help my future work in poverty law or any other legal work I may pursue.

Sincerely,

Meghan Roed
Class of 2012
University of Wisconsin Law School