

August 8, 2014

Dear Dan Ruben,

This summer I had the great pleasure of working at the Center for Family Representation (“CFR”) in Queens, New York. CFR represents indigent parents accused of child abuse or neglect in the Queens County Family Court. It is an interdisciplinary practice of attorneys and social workers.

I went into this summer wary about representing parents. My ultimate goal is to work in child advocacy in some capacity and I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to put in my best work representing what I viewed as “the bad guy.” Working at CFR changed my perspective drastically and immediately. CFR is dedicated to serving, not only the parents, but the family as a unit. They advocate maintaining the family unit and getting the parents whatever services are needed to be able to do so safely. I have worked with children rather extensively in the past and have always understood that, no matter what has happened, children almost always want to be with their parents. This summer taught me that, not only do children want to be at home, but being at home is usually what is in the best interest of the child.

The summer also proved itself to be very frustrating. Most of our clients are trapped by the Child Welfare System. The majority of parents want to do what is best for their children, but the majority of our parents were a part of the system themselves growing up. Some of our clients have parallel cases going on where they are the child in another case and the parent in ours. In most cases services are offered only after the children have been taken away and the parents are angry, depressed and desperate. Rather than doing the services and getting their kids back, the anger fuels a stubbornness that prevents the parents from doing anything. On top of this, there is one judge making the decisions. One judge who has never actually been to the clients home, one judge who has never actually heard from the children, one judge who is so far attenuated from the family that many of the arbitrary decisions end up being more harmful than helpful.

I observed many cases this summer. They were all frustrating in their own way, but there were the occasional cases that had a happy ending and made me understand why these attorneys do what they do every day.

I worked closely on one of these cases. Our client was a young mother who had moved to the U.S. from Egypt with her husband and two sons 11 months previously. During my second week at CFR, I accompanied a social worker to make a home visit. We made the visit on a Friday, her kids had been taken away the day before. Egypt, like many countries in the world, does not have laws protecting children. Our client left her two young sons at home on their own for 20 minutes while she went to the store to buy them yogurt. While she was gone a neighbor called the police and her children were taken away. During the home visit the social worker and I got to know the client through a series of pantomime and hand gestures because neither of us spoke her native language of Arabic. Our client was devastated and was willing to do anything to get her children back. It was apparent that this was a simple case of her not knowing any better.

We went back to court on Monday only to have it adjourned one more day. The social worker and I made another home visit that afternoon and accompanied her to court on Tuesday. While there the attorneys all agreed to allow the children to go home with an order that she not leave them on their own. Watching the social worker inform the parents that their children would be coming home to them that day was the best part of my summer. It made me better understand why anyone would represent parents and gave me a little more faith that the system isn’t completely broken.

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity,

Meghan Walsh
Brooklyn Law School

Equal Justice America Fellowship
Attn: Dan Ruben, Executive Director of EJA

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I gladly write this letter evaluating Meghan Walsh's work as a legal intern at the Center For Family Representation during the summer of 2014. As a Staff Attorney at the Center for Family representation, I had the pleasure of overseeing Meghan on a variety of legal projects for the two months that she interned at our organization. When Meghan joined us, she did not have any first-hand experience in child neglect and abuse cases, but she quickly exceeded our expectations by completing new and challenging assignments in a timely manner.

Meghan's passion for understanding Article Ten cases in family court was evident in her work. Meghan demonstrated professionalism and respect by completing her assignments and clearly communicating what she did not understand. During her internship, Meghan researched case law regarding expert testimony from a validator in a sex abuse case, permanent neglect in termination of parental rights case, circumstances under which the Court can issue orders of protection on behalf of non-respondents, and the Court's ability to proceed when a client has been deported. She was efficient and thorough in providing a memoranda of law on those issues. Meghan also reviewed case records and prepared outlines on the case theory. Meghan also had the opportunity to shadow myself and other attorney's in family court while we participated in trials, conferences, and initial intake for new cases, as well as seeking an emergency stay from the Appellate Division of an Order of Commitment.

In addition to the client contact Meghan had in court, she also went into the field, to help take photos at a home visit of a client who was seeking to have her children returned to her care. Meghan did not hesitate to ask questions and provide valuable feed back based on her observations.

If you should need any further information regarding Meghan's work performance, please do not hesitate to contact me at 646-761-3770.

Sincerely,



Priya Cumberbatch
Staff Attorney
Center for Family Representation