

August 14, 2007

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am writing to thank you and Equal Justice America for making it possible for me to work at the East Bay Community Law Center this summer. My husband is a graduate student and we have an almost-two-year-old son. Without Equal Justice America's support, it would not have been possible for me and my family to live this summer without incurring debt that would have made it more difficult for me to pursue a public interest career.

My experience at EBCLC helped both to focus my career goals and broaden my interests. Working at the East Bay Community Law Center also helped me identify characteristics I will seek out in future work environments; I particularly appreciated the Law Center's warm, welcoming environment, and the management's active support for work-life balance. My experience at EBCLC reinforced my aspiration to combine education and direct services in my future career. I enjoyed the Center's dual focus on educating law students and providing high-quality legal services to the local community. Observing EBCLC's attorneys at work and receiving mentorship from them taught me a lot about the type of attorney I would like to become. EBCLC's attorneys approach client interactions with reflection and humility, allowing them to see each client as an individual rather than a problem to be solved. Likewise, they answer each student question in a way that best helps that particular student to learn and grow.

I learned the most, however, from my clients. Before law school, I worked in the field of nonprofit immigration legal services—work which I found immensely rewarding—and I felt some initial trepidation about serving welfare recipients. Over the course of the summer, I discovered that I derive tremendous personal fulfillment from providing direct services to welfare recipients and helping them to better their situations. Although people living in extreme poverty in the United States often have more stacked against them than do newly arrived immigrants, their spirits are equally strong.

The story of Sandy (not her real name), a single mother of four children, best exemplifies the challenges and satisfaction of the work I did this summer, and the myriad obstacles facing my clients, all of whom were experiencing problems with their welfare benefits. Sandy came to see me because she was not receiving cash assistance for two of her four children. Because Sandy had received welfare during the time she was pregnant with these two children, the County deemed them permanently ineligible for aid under California's child exclusion law.

Because the County was only aiding two of her children, Sandy received \$723 per month rather than \$980, the maximum cash grant for a household size of five.

Sandy's outward appearance is calm and friendly; however, when I asked her at our first interview about her living circumstances, she began to cry and tremble. In the course of this initial interview, Sandy told me that she and her four children are homeless and living in an unsafe shelter—she hears gunshots every day and is afraid to walk down the street. She also said that after her food stamps run out (around the middle of every month) she has no food for herself and her family. However, her circumstances are better than they were in the past, when Sandy and her children had to sleep in the park. Sandy described the desolation she felt while watching her daughter waive goodbye to her friends at school, knowing that her daughter had no idea where she would sleep that night.

Sandy said that she is unable to hold down a job for more than a few weeks due to bipolar disorder, depression, and the side effects of her medications. Toward the end of our initial interview, Sandy confessed that she felt that she was just barely holding herself together mentally. She said that she could feel herself verging on an episode of severe depression, even though she had a prescription for anti-depressive medication and was seeing a therapist weekly. Sandy told me that she often feels her children are her only reason for living and working to improve her situation, even when she is feeling sad and hopeless.

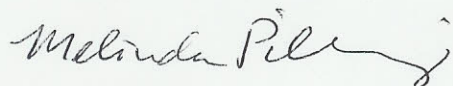
When I asked Sandy why she was homeless, she told me that she lost her Section 8 voucher because she reported her boyfriend's beatings of her to the police. Sandy told me about the severe physical, emotional, and sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her younger two children's father. As she spoke, Sandy seemed to be reliving the particularly severe instances of abuse, such as when her boyfriend beat her with a belt while she was pregnant and when he gave her medications so that she would pass out and he could rape her in her sleep. After one interview, Sandy left a voice mail message for me saying that she could not talk about her past any more; she needed all her mental strength to deal with the issues she was facing in the present, and could not afford to stir up past memories.

Ultimately, I was able to persuade the County that its decision not to aid all four of Sandy's children was wrong. Sandy now receives a full grant each month for herself and her children, and will receive a few thousand dollars in a lump sum for back benefits. Although Sandy remains homeless, and although \$980 per month is still a pitifully small amount of money to with which to support a family of five, I hope and believe that my work for Sandy will make some small difference in her life and the lives of her children.

By sharing her story with me, Sandy gave me a much larger gift than I was able to give her. Getting to know Sandy and having some sense of her daily struggle put in perspective my own small struggles to balance law school, my desire to serve the community, and the joys and challenges of parenting an almost two year old. Despite her poor mental health, her history of abuse, and her utter lack of familial support and resources, Sandy somehow—often just barely—manages to maintain shelter, feed her family, keep her children in school, and stave off her own depression. Sandy's strength and perseverance in the face of the many obstacles she is facing in her life will always inspire me.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for enabling me to serve and learn from Sandy and women like her this summer.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melinda Pilling". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed contact information.

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