

Dan Ruben
Executive Director, Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 204
13450 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, Virginia 23112

August 9, 2017

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Thank you very much for the opportunity to participate as an Equal Justice America Fellow this summer. I have interned at the Housing Unit at Community Legal Services in Philadelphia.

I served 63 clients this summer. These clients included people with schizophrenia, homeless people, people who had court cases coming up, and people who had court cases years ago. I learned the ins and outs of housing court—how to negotiate with opposing counsel, how to write appellate briefs, and perhaps most importantly, how to connect with our clients.

One client who comes to mind is Ms. Felicia Robinson (not her real name). Ms. Robinson had been living in a homeless shelter for months—but that still didn't stop her former property manager from sending her a bill for alleged carpet damage. I was able to talk to Ms. Robinson's social worker and her daughter. We wrote a letter back to the property manager explaining that the carpets had been damaged since before Ms. Robinson had moved in.

But that was just the tip of the iceberg. Over time, as Ms. Robinson and I began to work more on her case, she opened up to me. She told me about so many other issues affecting her life: a bad credit history that was holding her back. Struggles with finding a new place to live. Ms. Robinson also had a son and didn't know his whereabouts. Strictly speaking, most of Ms. Robinson's problems weren't legal problems—in the sense of requiring a court or a judge—but they were human problems. And I came to realize that much of our work as public interest law students (and likely as public interest lawyers) is not just to get victories in court: it's to listen. Ms. Robinson and I worked together, and she was able to meet with a credit counselor at Clarifi. She was able to locate her son. She has told me that she is committed to turning her life around and has continued to meet with credit counselors to improve her financial history. When I had to tell her that this was my last week interning at CLS, I think we both felt incredibly sad not to work together anymore.

Of course, other clients weren't so easy. There was the woman who insisted I call the Jon Bon Jovi Foundation several times. (I did, and they finally got back to me and said they couldn't help.) Other clients didn't speak English or struggled with the language. I'll never forget the anxiety I felt struggling to translate for our client as we negotiated with a landlord in the mediation room behind housing court; we were able to make a deal that the client felt happy about. Some clients wanted help with old judgments from years ago. Others showed up 30, 40, 50 minutes late to court hearings. As one of the attorneys in our office said, there's much about our clients' lives we can't control—so it's even more important than ever that we control meticulously the things that we can.

A few other clients come to mind. One client came to our office with a daughter who suffered from a genetic disorder. She was incredibly sweet, but she thrashed uncontrollably, taking things off our attorney's desk, ripping them up, scribbling. Her mother's landlord had refused to pay the water bills, and now the water company was threatening an imminent shut-off. We managed to contact her daughter's physician, who wrote a letter to the water company explaining how a water shut-off would create a medical emergency for mother and daughter alike. Working frantically, unsure of when the zero-hour would hit, we were able to avoid a shut-off.

Another client told me that someone had forged her signature on a judgment by agreement (JBA). She swore up and down that she didn't know anything about the JBA. I spoke with her daughter and we determined that she had actually signed the JBA after all—but because she appeared in municipal court without an attorney (*pro se*), she didn't understand what she had signed. The JBA had been breached weeks ago, and eviction was scheduled for any day. We were able to go through every rent receipt she had kept meticulously, month by month since late 2015, and compared them to the rent ledger her apartment company had provided. We showed that the landlord had made mistakes and that our client had paid more than the landlord had given her credit for. It wasn't easy—the landlord accused our client of doctoring money orders at one point—but we were finally able to show that there was no breach of the JBA, and eviction was averted.

Being a part of the summer Equal Justice America fellowship program has been incredible. It has meant that I have had an opportunity to assist people with housing needs beyond what I have ever experienced. I hope to continue working in housing law in the future—and I certainly hope to work full-time in public interest law.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate in the Equal Justice America fellowship program.

Sincerely,

/s/

Andrew Gerst
New York University School of Law
Anticipated Graduation Year: 2018



August 29, 2017

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

Re: Andrew Gerst

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am writing to say thank you for supporting Andrew Gerst, who did a great job as an intern this summer. I supervised Andrew in our Housing Unit at Community Legal Services in Philadelphia.

Throughout the summer, Andrew demonstrated his commitment to our clients time and again. Our office remains perpetually strapped for resources, meaning we cannot serve many of the people who come seeking help. In situations when other students might have turned a client away, Andrew often agreed to help. Andrew assisted in translating for clients who did not speak English. He also has worked hard to listen to the needs of clients themselves. He has demonstrated that it is important for advocates not just to do what the lawyer thinks is best, but to respect the wishes of the client.

Andrew assisted more than 60 clients. In our unit, he represented clients in person, assisted in writing briefs, and consulted with attorneys in our unit. Like the other interns in our unit, Andrew also conducted intake at least twice a week. During intake, he interviewed potential clients and discussed strategies for them (such as making sure the landlord had provided a certificate of rental suitability, taking photographs of damaged items, withholding rent, etc.). He followed up with phone calls and emails with the client. He also often negotiated with opposing counsel on behalf of clients. Andrew came with me to housing court and assisted clients who were facing eviction hearings. He attended a settlement conference and prepared for a trial at the Court of Common Pleas for a case appealed from landlord-tenant court.

Andrew has been able to achieve excellent outcomes. In one case, a client of ours faced eviction because her son, who used to live with her, had been convicted of a drug-related offense. Thanks to Andrew's diligent work demonstrating that our client had already signed a lease without her son's name on it, the Philadelphia Housing Authority agreed to withdraw the case. In another case, a client faced a judgment of more than \$500, plus court costs and the like. Andrew was



able to successfully negotiate an agreement where the client paid just \$50 and was able to stay in her home. Andrew also helped a client sign a settlement agreement for the Court of Common Pleas. While the client faced a complaint asking for more than \$3,000 in damages, the settlement agreement withdrew all of these monetary claims save for the escrowed rent. These are just a few examples—I know Andrew has been working on many other cases as well.

Andrew was extremely helpful in work I have been continuing for one of our most vulnerable clients. This client is an elderly formerly homeless veteran. The client is being threatened with eviction because of an alleged failure to keep his room clean for bed bug treatment. Even with his heavy caseload and near-daily intake duties, Andrew wrote a thorough memorandum of law exploring these issues. With help from our unit's social worker and me, Andrew argued that the failure of the housing provider to assist the client with cleaning constituted a failure to provide a reasonable accommodation, as required by the Fair Housing Act. Andrew researched guidance documents from the Department of Justice and the Department of Housing and Urban Development for this memorandum. He also interviewed the client again, communicated with the client's physicians, and helped the client produce new documentary and medical evidence supporting his claim. Based on Andrew's work, I have been able to submit an emergency petition to stay eviction.

I know that Andrew will make an outstanding lawyer. We have been lucky to have him. I thank you for continuing to support dedicated public interest law students like Andrew Gerst.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thu B. Tran', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Thu B. Tran, Esq.
Senior Staff Attorney
Housing Unit
Landlord-Tenant Housing Unit