

October 15, 2015

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Thank you so much for the opportunity to participate in Equal Justice America's summer fellowship program. With EJA's support, I completed a ten-week internship with the Civil Action Practice of the Bronx Defenders. Specifically, I worked with the Immigration Defense Practice. The Bronx Defenders provides innovative, holistic, and client-centered criminal defense, family defense, civil legal services, social work support, and advocacy to economically disadvantaged residents of the Bronx. The organization as a whole represents approximately 35,000 individuals each year and reaches hundreds more through outreach programs and community legal education.

The Immigration Defense Practice works largely with noncitizens facing removal proceedings while in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention. Most of the clients I worked with this summer found the Bronx Defenders through the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (NYIFUP), New York City's one-of-a-kind program that provides free counsel to any detained immigrant facing removal proceedings in New York City who meets financial eligibility criteria. Over the course of the summer, I had several opportunities to participate in screening potential clients for the NYIFUP program, which took place on the morning of these individuals' first scheduled hearings before the Immigration Judge. I was moved by the great relief and glimmer of hope I saw cross many faces when we told these men and women that they would have a free attorney or that their case was worth fighting. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to participate in this program. I hope that one day free legal representation will be the norm in immigration proceedings, and I am committed to playing a role in that movement.

One client I met through NYIFUP was a young man who expressed great fear of being returned to his home country. He had been arrested for praying four times and tortured on two of those occasions before seeking refuge in the U.S. He felt certain that if he were deported, his government would presume he was guilty of something and immediately arrest, torture, and indefinitely detain him upon return. He also feared for his family's safety should his government learn that he was being detained or if he were deported. As I spent much of the next two weeks researching conditions in his home country, my concern for this client's safety grew stronger and stronger. Expert reports from government agencies in the U.S. and Europe, non-governmental organizations, and even a former ambassador to the country all echoed every nuance of the experiences and fears he had relayed to my supervisor and me. Our client had no family in the U.S. and his few friends in the community were fearful of getting involved with his immigration case, but I worked with the few contacts we did have to build trust with them and to gather evidence in support of his asylum case and a request to release him while his case was pending. I

even traveled out to his neighborhood to visit his workplace, apartment, and house of worship to try to speak with potential witnesses and to gather evidence. In the last week of my internship, we convinced the Immigration Judge who had previously set no bond to reconsider and set a bond amount that his friends were able to scrape together. His chances of winning asylum are vastly improved now that he is not detained, since there will be more time to prepare his application and he will be able to participate in developing his own case.

The Bronx Defenders Immigration Defense Practice has also helped respond to the recent increase in women and children fleeing violence and persecution in Central America who have been placed on expedited Immigration Court dockets. This summer, I worked closely with one such family, a mother and her three daughters, who fled domestic violence and other dangerous conditions. Because the girls' fathers have never supported them, they likely qualify for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), which provides a path to legal permanent residence and eventually citizenship for children who cannot be reunited with one or both parents due to abuse, abandonment, or neglect. I led the development of their cases, which involved extensive fact development, drafting affidavits from the mother and oldest daughter, and researching state law in order to argue that it is in the best interest of the girls for the Family Court to grant guardianship to their mother and grant our motion for special findings (necessary prerequisites for the girls to apply for SIJS). I am continuing to work on these cases this fall and will participate in their Family Court hearing later this month.

In addition to direct advocacy like the two cases described above, I also had opportunities this summer to participate in other aspects of the Bronx Defenders' community engagement. I volunteered at the annual Celebration of Families (a gathering honoring families separated by Family Court proceedings who have been reunited in the past year) and Block Party (a day-long event open to the public that provides entertainment, free food, and information about community resources). I also spent two days doing "community intake," which involved taking calls and walk-ins from community members seeking help on a wide variety of issues and providing them with information or brief services, or connecting them with a Bronx Defenders attorney where appropriate. I especially loved getting involved with the Client Library, which provides free books and magazines to any member of the community who stops by the office and also sends reading materials to current or former clients who are detained. I solicited donations of reading materials from staff as well as my NYU Law community and then reviewed clients' requests and picked out and sent books and magazines to match their expressed interests.

My summer with the Bronx Defenders Immigration Defense Practice was an extremely inspiring and educational experience that certainly reinforced my commitment to a career in immigration law. I cannot thank you and Equal Justice America enough for your support of my summer internship and for your ongoing support of the next generation of public interest lawyers.

Sincerely,



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