

August 20, 2012

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Even before I started my law school classes, I started hearing, “Law school doesn’t teach you how to practice law.” Every lawyer I know has told me some version of this at some point. Naturally, as a law student, I thought this made absolutely no sense. Why am I going to law school, if not to learn how to practice law? What are they teaching me, if not that?

And then, somewhere between my third client intake appointment of the day with a domestic violence victim and an all-staff case acceptance meeting, it hit me. I have been studying law for two years, and I did not learn any of this. I did not learn what to do when a client starts crying in my office because she wants to make her boyfriend become a good father. I did not learn how much of myself to reveal to a woman whose husband is dangerously violent—does telling her about my own children build trust, or put my family at risk? While I knew, in theory, that my clients would be flawed individuals themselves, no one ever taught me how to pivot the conversation to ask a sobbing client about her criminal history. Most of all, no civil procedure or contracts class ever taught me how much of this I could take.

It will take years of experience, practice, and mentoring to learn to be the advocate that victims of domestic violence need. My Equal Justice America Fellowship with Legal Services of Northern Virginia provided my first step on the path to becoming that advocate. I had practical experiences not available to me in a traditional law school classroom: I drafted pleadings; worked with clients to answer discovery; interviewed witnesses and drafted questions for direct examination; and appeared in court to represent clients in uncontested divorce hearings. The attorneys at LSNV welcomed me as a member of their team. They gave me the opportunity to present cases at all-staff and practice group meetings, conduct my own client intake interviews, and draft advice and counsel letters to the clients whose cases were ultimately not accepted. They spent hours role playing with me as I debated hearsay objections and revised the questions I drafted for a protective order hearing.

My summer fellowship gave me my first practical exposure to the basics of being a family law attorney, but the most important lessons I learned were about myself and my own abilities. Many of my fellow interns were happier working on consumer debt issues, unable to face stories of severe abuse. I learned that I can sit across the table from a fifteen year old who was molested

by her step-father and listen to her story while her mother cries . I can sit next to her while that step-father walks into the courthouse. They don't teach you in law school how to do that. They don't teach you how to look inside yourself and figure out if you are strong enough to be the person who can. But I did, and I am.

Sincerely,

Patricia Klanke

The George Washington University Law School  
Class of 2013