

August 27, 2009

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

In the past, when faced with similar assignments, I have often found it difficult to describe my internship experience. The reason for this was that, although I may have done some work, it was either not interesting or not the type of substantive work I would be happy describing.

What a contrast as I sit down to describe my internship at Greater Boston Legal Services! I find myself almost overwhelmed with things to discuss. However, in service to you and in service to brevity, I shall stay within the limits prescribed by the assignment.

The most exciting work that I was able to do this summer was to represent clients seeking disability benefits in hearings before Administrative Law Judges (ALJs). After being denied on their first appeal of an initial unfavorable decision, disability claimants have the opportunity to request a hearing in which an ALJ will decide whether or not they are disabled. Claimants have the opportunity to seek legal representation to help them in these hearings.

The first time I represented a client at a hearing was quite memorable and thus, I shall describe the experience in detail. At the hearing, I gave an opening statement describing why my client was entitled to disability benefits. I then proceeded to question the client about his impairments, and as he described his physical impairments, all seemed to go well.

However, when I began to question him about his mental impairments, including anxiety and depression, the client broke down into tears. Here was a man over twice my age crying in a manifestation of longing and frustration. I was taken aback. I looked at the ALJ, and then at my supervising attorney, and was truly puzzled at this turn of events. It was at that moment that I began to understand the importance of the work I was doing. I was not grabbing a coffee for a boss, or making copies for an attorney in the office. I was holding the life of a human being in my hands, a human being who was entirely depending on me to successfully advocate his claim. That was a truly powerful moment for me, and one I will carry with me as I proceed in my professional career.

The other client I represented did not break down into tears during the hearing. It was not until after the hearing that I had yet another epiphany of the significance of the work I was involved in. After explaining that we would likely receive a favorable decision based on how the hearing went, and explaining the procedure for appeal in case of an unfavorable decision, I told the client, "Take care and God bless you." He then said to me "God bless you sir, and I thank God for putting you into my life." And there it was, a simple, yet for me, very powerful statement of how truly crucial my efforts were to this one individual.

In ALJ hearings, a client's representative also has the opportunity to submit a brief to the ALJ outlining the reasons the client at issue should be considered disabled. I was able to write a brief for the second client described above, as well as for a number of other clients. In addition, if a client loses at the ALJ stage, he or she has the opportunity to appeal this decision yet again, this time to the Appeals Council. Few interns were able to write briefs at this level of appeal, but, fortunately for me, I had the opportunity to submit a brief to the Appeals Council as well.

And, good sir, the examples of the substantive work I was able to do continue, but I did promise to be brief. Therefore, let me conclude by saying thank you, thank you, and thank you once more for providing the financial assistance that made this internship possible for me. Words cannot capture the feeling of gratitude I have toward you and your organization. Let it suffice to say that I am deeply indebted to you, and I assure you that I shall always remain your humble servant.

Paul Zoltowski
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