

August 28, 2008

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I can't thank you and Equal Justice America enough for the opportunity to work at Casa Myrna Vazquez this summer, providing direct legal services to survivors of domestic violence. I am passionate about working with this population and my experience would not have been possible without your generous summer fellowship.

Helping women who are victims of violence seek the justice and relief they deserve was the primary reason I chose to go to law school. I must admit that by the end of my second year of legal studies I was feeling somewhat disenchanted with the legal system and I worried that real justice may never be possible for women with so little social or economic power. After spending this summer working with our clients and the amazing attorneys dedicated to helping them, all the cynicism and doubt that was beginning to plague me has completely washed away. I have seen first hand that an abused woman can find relief in the legal system, and even if what she recovers is only a fraction of what she lost, it is still enough to make a real difference in her daily life, and, sometimes more importantly, the vindication that comes with a ruling in her favor is a big step toward empowerment. A victory in court did not always come easy, or at all, and sometimes the system was not as accommodating as I think it should be, but it gave me hope to know that I was part of a team of attorneys and legal aids who worked tirelessly to find an answer – even if it ended up being a non-legal solution. At the very least, our clients always had someone in their corner, and that is the kind of assistance I always envisioned providing as an attorney.

Not only did my summer experience help restore my faith in the legal system, it also exponentially increased my confidence and ability to represent these women in my legal career. Every day I learned something new, met someone new, heard a new story, and helped brainstorm a new legal solution or strategy. I learned more about family law than I ever could have in the classroom as I worked on divorces, restraining orders, paternity, and child support. I worked on some complicated cases involving modifying child custody orders, including permission for the mother to remove the children from the country. The stakes in a custody case can be very high because ultimately, one of the parents may not be able to see the children ever again, or at least not for a very long time. Because of the history of abuse, even a common order for joint custody with visitation can lead to serious safety concerns and enforcement problems.

Many of our clients' family law issues intersected with a number of other legal and social issues such as immigration, criminal charges, housing, disability, education, sexual abuse, children with

special needs, and involvement of the Department of Social Services who frequently investigated abuse and neglect by both parents. All of our clients' primary concern was, of course, their safety. Often there was an available legal solution, but our client could not take it for fear of retaliation by her abuser. These special considerations required us take a holistic approach to serving our clients; we couldn't just address a client's family law issue without thoroughly considering what the consequences may be in her life as a whole. This meant we had to get to know our clients well and learn to see things from their individual perspectives, which made for both challenging and fulfilling work.

I worked directly with a total of fifty-five women over the twelve weeks I worked at Casa Myrna. Fourteen of those were women were clients we took on for full representation in the cases mentioned above. Six women were guests at one of the three shelters operated by Casa Myrna, and thirty-six were women who called the legal helpline seeking advice and referrals. Speaking to the women on our helpline was something I did almost every day and it was one of my most rewarding experiences. For at least one of these women, I was the first person to whom she ever disclosed her abusive marriage. For most, I was one of only a handful of people in whom the caller had confided. It meant a lot to me that these women trusted me enough to tell me their stories and had faith in me that I could find a solution to their problem. The callers usually had relatively simple legal problems. After I spoke with each caller I would review her case with an attorney and we would call back with either brief advice or referrals to organizations that could help them – both legal and non-legal. There is a real skill to interviewing women who are survivors of abuse and you have to be just as good at listening as you are at asking questions. One caller explained how hard it was for her to call and ask for help and she thanked me for being such an easy person to talk to. After I got off the phone with her she had a whole list of places to call for help with everything from paying her electric bill to applying for asylum and she told me that she wasn't afraid to ask for help any more and that she felt very hopeful. I think she experienced something more than hope. I think she finally felt empowered because she realized she could take action and regain control of her life. That is why I am so proud of my work this summer: because I believe that action is something even better than hope.

Thank you again for the summer fellowship program and I would like to extend a special thank you to the donors who made it financially possible for me to have this experience.

Sincerely Yours,

Pepper Hayes
Boston University, Class of 2009