

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I first want to thank you and Equal Justice America (EJA) for funding my fellowship at Equip for Equality (EFE), a protection and advocacy organization serving people with disabilities in Illinois. As you may or may not recall, I have been a quadriplegic for the last 20 years and life with a disability is not easy. It was facing my personal struggles being disabled that brought me to law school wanting to become an advocate for others in the disability community. I have also always wanted to work in an office setting but had failed to secure any such position during the four years between my undergraduate and current law studies. However, that struggle made EFE's Civil Rights Team internship experience all the more meaningful to me. EJA's financial support was the missing component to satisfying my employment goal. I cannot thank you enough.

One of the first things an EFE intern learns during their training sessions is that over 80% of the disabled population in the US is unemployed or underemployed contrasted with about 15% of the non-disabled population. However 60% of the unemployed disabled population want to work contrasted with 45% of the non-disabled population. This was a profound moment of learning for me as it validated what I had always thought: people with disabilities *want* to work and yet they often remain unemployed. Employment is such a crucial aspect of our society and it has become a way people evaluate their self-worth as they contribute to their communities. Employment also serves as an avenue for achieving financial independence and being able to live independently within the community. Unfortunately a significant number of barriers exist that make finding and maintaining employment difficult for the disabled, barriers such as access to education and training, adequate transportation and to health care. Other barriers include societal attitudes, discrimination, loss of Social Security and Medicaid benefits, and employers' denial of reasonable accommodations. EFE works on all these issues to ensure that the disabled not only have equal and fair access to employment opportunities but also that their rights are maintained after entering the workforce.

Most of the cases I did research for and the clients I served dealt with aspects of employment discrimination, whether it was a denial of a reasonable accommodation or retaliation for exercising one's right to take a medical leave of absence. One project I was assigned to was to research caselaw and help draft a response to a motion to dismiss in a case where an employer denied to grant a scent-free workplace policy that would accommodate an employee's chemical sensitivity. I wrote a research memo that assisted EFE lawyers in deciding to take legal action on behalf of a client who was fired after taking federally entitled medical leave. I also wrote a research memo for a training webinar that will educate attendees on recent developments in ADA retaliation issues that effect employer-employee relationships. I also assisted people who collect SSI and/or SSDI with their Ticket to Work and overpayment options. Being able to work and continue to keep these benefits are critical to ensuring the disabled are financially stable.

In addition to employment matters I attended several court proceedings in a state guardianship case, attended meetings regarding a consent decree and implementation

plan that will integrate people with developmental disabilities in the community and participated in several outreach activities, most notably marching in the Disability Pride Parade. I also provided clients with information on their rights to public accommodations such as accessible parking spaces and ramp specifications and advised restaurants and small businesses on their legal obligations to accommodate disabled patrons. Arming people with disabilities with their rights and teaching and facilitating self-advocacy is critical to the Disability Rights Movement. Living with a disability requires that an individual self-advocate on a daily basis. Teaching self-advocacy skills is truly rewarding because I understand the life long impact these skills will have, after all, I would not be who I am today without my own.

I cannot possibly begin to express how wonderful my internship experience at Equip for Equality was for me. I not only got a chance to share my background with Equip's staff and clients but I learned a lot about the law, the public interest field and myself. Knowing I have had a positive impact on Equip's clients not only makes me feel good, but it motivates me to finish law school strong and dedicate my life to serving others.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Lyn Wylie". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'R' and a long, sweeping underline.

Rebecca Lyn Wylie

Loyola University-Chicago School of Law
Class of 2015