

August 20, 2008

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am writing to thank you and Equal Justice America for supporting my internship this summer at Catholic Charities Immigration Legal Services in Washington, DC. I am happy to report that my experience there has been informative and challenging, and that it has strengthened my resolve to become a public interest attorney.

My supervising attorney specialized in employment and criminal immigration matters in addition to the more conventional family immigration and adjustment of status cases. I assisted her with client interviews, foreign and domestic legal research, assembling petitions and applications, and communication with clients and government agencies. I also attended the meetings of community advocates such as the Capital Area Immigrants' Rights (CAIR) Coalition as well as "stakeholder meetings" at the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS).

I saw firsthand the contradictions in immigration law that cause the system to be so maligned and reform so difficult. Several clients came up against obstacles in the legalization process because they had entered the country illegally or had used fraudulent immigration documents to enter. As an aspiring lawyer, I had been ambivalent about advocating for people who had broken the law. In the course of the summer, I came to understand that breaking the law probably had been the only option for many of our clients. For example, activists who worked against oppressive regimes could only escape their countries with fraudulent passports. Many of them did not know that if they did not identify themselves immediately at the U.S. port of entry, they would commit fraud and that it would work against them years later in the legalization process.

As a legal immigrant, I used to share the view that immigrants who "broke the law" by entering illegally or overstayed their visas should not be entitled to leniency: after all, my family waited in line for ten years before we got our visa, and everyone else should do the same. But after working with our clients this summer, I see that not everyone can afford to wait. In their countries there are wars, oppressive governments, natural disasters, and no jobs.

Incidentally, I visited the Holocaust Memorial Museum this summer. It occurred to me that some of our attitudes toward immigrants today are probably not so different from those directed at Jews fleeing Nazi Germany. Sixty years after the Jewish Holocaust, it is obvious – to me, at least – that any country that could afford to do so should have taken them in. Why should our obligation today to people from Haiti and El Salvador be less obvious?

I had the opportunity to do substantial work on several very interesting cases. One of them involved an asylee who was a disabled veteran of the First Chechen War of 1994-96. In arguing for his permanent resident status, I researched and wrote about the legality of the war under Russian, Chechen, and international law. While the process was as intellectually stimulating as an academic project, the fact that it had actual value for a human being made it doubly satisfying.

Having worked at an understaffed and under-funded nonprofit before law school, I was struck by the calmness at Catholic Charities. After working with several attorneys and paralegals, I discovered that they shared certain qualities that contributed to an effective organization: they were capable and responsible, but they also knew when to be firm with clients and how to set limits. They saw their cases as partnerships with clients, where each party had expectations and obligations. My supervisor, in particular, was excellent at communicating this to clients.

This was an extremely valuable lesson for me. Before this summer, I believed that a frenzied environment was a given at any nonprofit organization. I also thought that staff burnout and high turnover – at significant cost to the organization and its clients – was inevitable. However, all of the attorneys at Catholic Charities have stayed for more than five years. Everyone works reasonable hours, and yet the organization maintains a high standard of service that keeps bolstering its reputation in the community.

The experience also changed my perspective on charging clients for services. When I interviewed new clients, I had to inform them that an initial consultation would cost sixty dollars. It was the most difficult part of my job. Catholic Charities charged a fraction of the market rate for its services, and most clients were happy to retain our attorneys at comparatively low prices, but I still knew that it was a lot of money for them – especially coupled with the government application fees which, unlike ours, were not negotiable.

I gradually became reconciled to the idea of charging for services as the summer progressed. Besides the fact that an organization needs funds to survive and continue to serve its clients, I realized that financial solvency affords it a measure of political independence. For example, it would not need to rely as much on government grants and private donors, and it would be better able to advocate for clients in a more outspoken manner and direct its own course. It would have the capital to do freely what it thinks is just.

Thank you again for supporting my work this summer at Catholic Charities. I am very grateful for your generosity and your commitment to developing a sustainable corps of public interest attorneys.

Best regards,

Sherra Wong
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Class of 2010