

August 30, 2014

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My EJA Summer Fellowship with the Chicago Legal Clinic (CLC) gave me first-hand insight into the life of a public interest lawyer. Every day at CLC, I worked on numerous cases belonging to clients who were able to receive affordable legal services because of the work and commitment of the CLC attorneys to serving under-served communities. As a student just finishing her first year in law school, I was not exactly sure how I would be able to contribute to their work. But right away, the attorneys entrusted me with the task of connecting with clients and drafting various types of court and legal documents on their behalf. It was very challenging, but I learned more legal skills than I ever could have imagined. The attorneys were willing to teach me the purposes behind each task I was given, and they gave me very helpful feedback on my work. I was able to put into practice the things I learned from my law school classes. I became fascinated with the Cook County court system, and I enjoyed observing the attorneys represent their clients.

Although I mostly interacted with our clients over the phone, I had gotten to the point with several of them where I was working very closely on their cases, and I was able to help them understand each step in their case. I loved being able to explain the law or the legal processes to them, and as they began to understand the process, they were better equipped to navigate through the legal system and advocate for themselves. One case I had the pleasure of working on was Dianne's<sup>1</sup> case. Dianne was a victim of domestic violence and was in the process of getting a divorce. I spoke with her on many occasions as I prepared some legal documents in her case. Although the task of preparing a document was not "glorious" in itself, I was grateful for the chance to help her. She was in a vulnerable place in her life. Her husband had verbally abused her for years, and she had the sound of "defeat" in her voice. She was barely making any income, and her husband had full control over their finances. Yet she made the brave step towards freedom from her abuser by filing for a divorce. I felt privileged that she would share some of her story with me. A few weeks later, when the attorneys told me that her divorce was final, I smiled knowing that she could start a new journey towards healing, and that I had played a small role in helping her case.

Thursdays were my favorite days because every Thursday, the attorneys and I staffed a live call at the Cook County Criminal Court, providing free legal aid to pro se petitioners who needed help responding to the state's attorney's objections to their petition to expunge or seal their

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<sup>1</sup> Name changed to protect anonymity.

criminal records. Because I was not yet eligible to personally stand with any petitioners before the judge, I interviewed them and gathered important information to share with the attorneys regarding the petitioner's criminal history, current hardships, or ways they overcame great obstacles to make positive changes in their lives. Unfortunately, I also heard countless stories of systemic injustice that affected the clients' lives and their ability to obtain housing, employment, higher education, or self-respect. I was discouraged to see how, in a clear and tangible way, the effects of injustice continued long after one was arrested for a crime, and many times, for a crime he or she did not commit. Each week, the attorneys would stand with 30-40 individual petitioners, and after a couple hours, their petitions would be granted. I witnessed faces of gratitude, joy, and relief as the petitioners walked out the courthouse doors; those Thursdays were powerful days.

My Summer Fellowship confirmed that my decision to go to law school was the right decision, and only affirmed my calling to work with the under-served. This summer showed me that being a public interest lawyer requires a lot of time, dedication, patience, and sacrifice, as there are many challenges in providing legal services to vulnerable communities. But the attorneys inspired me, and I respect the profession so much more. Each attorney had a unique approach in helping their clients, and together they were a wonderful team.

I am very grateful for the opportunity I had to grow as a law student through my Summer Fellowship, and for the funding I received so I could obtain the fullest experience possible without worrying about my financial situation. Please extend my gratitude to the donors and sponsoring organizations who allowed me serve those most in need this summer.

Sincerely,

Sue Lee  
DePaul University College of Law  
J.D. Candidate, *expected May 2016*