

August 25, 2017

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 express my sincerest thanks for the fellowship Equal Justice America provided me. EJA's support allowed me to work for LAF, the largest civil legal aid service provider in the Chicago area. I worked in the Education Law Practice Group, where I helped attorneys represent indigent clients navigating school-related issues, including special education, school discipline, and bullying. My summer experience and hearing my clients' stories affirmed my commitment to public interest law.

All of our clients were Chicago-area children and parents facing school-related issues. Most often, our clients had a disability that their school was not properly addressing. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), public schools must provide accommodations and modifications in order to allow disabled students access to a quality education, but, sadly, many schools fail to meet that obligation. The attorneys I worked with at LAF advocated zealously on behalf of these students in order to get them much-needed services or compel their schools to provide what they had promised.

One special education story will stay with me long past this summer. This client, a three-year old boy who loved music and fashion, had autism. He was non-verbal and had seen a myriad of different doctors who all agreed that he needed a highly-specialized school environment, and soon, in order for him to catch up to peers his age. The school district refused a different placement, however, insisting that he was higher-functioning than everyone in his life reported. LAF is now filing a motion for a hearing on his behalf. This child's story impacted me because his future is at a crossroads: at such a young age, he is poised to either benefit from legislation designed to help him achieve or be failed by a system that does not know how to meet his needs. LAF's intervention comes at an important time in this child's life, and I know the attorney on his case will fight tooth and nail alongside his mother to help this child get what he needs to succeed.

Some of our clients faced expulsion or other school discipline, and LAF helped ensure that their schools could not simply deny them an education by pushing them out. One child, an eleven-year old girl who had recently lost her father to violence, was facing

expulsion by a principal and a school system who did not understand her history of trauma. Despite her loss, her school threatened to expel her (at an absurdly young age) for a playground incident. LAF's intervention allowed her to stay at school, maintaining the stability of friendships and teacher relationships there. I was touched by this child's resilience in the face of trauma.

In addition, a large part of our client base were wards of the state because of a contract between LAF and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. These clients interacted with the system – and too often were failed by the system – in many ways. They were removed from their parents, often placed with strangers, and, when they got to LAF, were being failed by their schools as well. Because of this, these clients were some of the most impactful to serve. One client had been removed from her home because of a history of abuse. Now living in a group home, her school had promised her a full time paraprofessional because of her how her trauma history affected her education. Her school failed to provide an aide, and because of that failure, one of her estranged family members was able to kidnap her for several days. Because she was a ward of the state, there is a strong chance this egregious failure would have gone unaddressed without parents to advocate on her behalf. But LAF took the district to a due process hearing, and our client won on every issue. I got to attend that hearing and help the attorneys prepare their argument this summer, and the feeling of winning for our client after the tense days of testimony was exhilarating. It proved to me that lawyers can, indeed, work for justice by amplifying the voices of our clients and holding the institutions that fail them accountable.

Throughout this summer, it could be easy to demonize school and district officials, but as a former educator, I know that everyone with whom we worked truly had the best interests of the child at heart. I admired the attorneys at LAF for the mutual respect and grace they modeled in their interactions with these parties. Education law is a unique corner of the law because, ultimately, everyone involved is working towards the same goal, even if we disagree as to how to get there.

I want to extend my deepest thanks to EJA for making this experience possible. Working at LAF and meeting these children and families has inspired me. After this summer, I am determined to continue to work for justice.

Sincerely,

/s/ Katherine Bruce
The University of Chicago Law School
Juris Doctor Candidate, 2019

August 30, 2017

Sent Via Email Only

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
c/o Katie Toman
Email: KATIE@EQUALJUSTICEAMERICA.ORG

RE: Kathy Bruce Summer Fellowship

Mr. Ruben:

This letter is in regards to Kathy Bruce's Equal Justice America fellowship. This summer, Kathy interned with LAF's Children and Families Practice Group on the education law team. Our education law team represents students and their parents in special education, school discipline, bullying, residency, and other education matters. The majority of our clients are children who are youth in care (i.e. wards of the state). Our interns are involved in all aspects of representation: client interviewing, records reviews, correspondence with opposing parties, drafting pleadings, hearing and IEP meeting preparation, research, and more. Kathy engaged in most of these activities during her summer fellowship. She worked with several different attorneys on about a dozen different client cases.

Kathy was a reliable, thorough intern and she has a great work ethic. She was very proactive in seeking out work. Her demeanor was professional. She often stayed late in order to get work done that had to get done.

Her ability to quickly understand and analyze legal issues was impressive in light of her relative inexperience. She completed a thorough records review of a new case without much oversight/instruction, and was able to competently identify and discuss the notable pieces. She was also able to quickly identify issues at an IEP meeting.

Her client interaction skills were also notable. She was respectful and attentive when we had a client meeting with a seventeen year-old client at the temporary shelter in which he is staying. This kind of environment could feel challenging or out-of-comfort for a lot of people, but she acclimated well. We think her experience teaching benefited her interactions with student clients.

Her research and writing was noteworthy. She performed research on evidentiary issues in a special education due process case and her research was thorough and helpful. She completed various writing assignments on her own, such as internal

research memos. She also drafted parts of state compliance complaints, an IEP dissent, and a closing brief. All of her writing was clear and persuasive. It was one of her strengths.

We also had two active special education due process cases that Kathy worked on. On the administrative tasks, she was organized and efficient – which is essential when dealing with large document production and no support staff. On the other case, Kathy participated in our four-day hearing and provided invaluable assistance in taking copious notes. More significantly, she was also a great asset to the team in strategy discussions before and during the hearing. Her grasp of both the legal arguments as well as her insight into the persuasive “flow” of the case was essential.

LAF is always appreciative of EJA’s funding opportunities for our legal interns. Please contact me if you have any questions about the above information.

Sincerely,

/s/ Ashley Fretthold
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