

To: Dan Ruben
Executive Director, Equal Justice America
From: Nicole Joseph
Date: August 9, 2016
Re: Fellowship Experience

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer I had the delightful experience of working at LAF. LAF is a not-for-profit free legal service agency that serves the legal needs of those who are below the poverty line. I worked in the Children and Families Department, which was then split into two further teams – Education Law, and Domestic Relations. Because of my desire to work with issues related to domestic violence, I was placed with the Domestic Relations Team. This team works tirelessly to provide victims of domestic violence with safe homes to live in and ways to regain control of their lives after making the brave and difficult decision to try to change their situations. Often these women have trouble staying on their feet as their husbands/partners were previously taking care of the bills, and had prohibited them from working while together. Now it is difficult for them to get a job, and even harder to balance a job while also single-handedly taking care of the kids. It was our job at LAF to help provide these necessities by getting our clients and their children orders of protection, child support payments, and maintenance payments. We were also able to handle their divorces to make sure they got the most equitable outcome without having to worry about paying attorneys fees.

While I had anticipated working with domestic violence and the often terrible and heart-wrenching stories that come with working in this field, I was not fully prepared for the ones I ended up hearing. The threat of violence our clients sometimes faced was well

beyond my levels of comprehension. I had seen and dealt with a lot of physical violence such as pushing, hitting, and beating, but this was the first time I handled cases, which involved guns, and gangs. There were sometimes very detailed descriptions of how an abuser wanted to kill his victim. At times this was a lot for me to handle emotionally, (from which I learned a great deal about self-care), but it was also these more extreme cases which served as reminders of exactly why we need legal services such as the ones at LAF in place. It was *imperative* that we got our clients and their children into safe homes as efficiently as possible. Even if the threats were empty threats, it did so much to ease the minds of our clients by offering them a legal remedy.

It was simply a joy to work under my two supervisors who approached each case and the work a little differently. Although they had different skills and attributes, they made it incredibly clear throughout the summer that whichever method you take, you take it wholeheartedly, and fight zealously for your client. It was empowering to watch two women hold their own (and then some!) in the courtroom, especially when there was no money to motivate that fight. They provided such great examples of the kind of lawyers we should strive to be, and I am forever grateful for that example. I learned so much during my time at LAF, and am thankful to EJA for helping to make that a reality.

Warmly,

Nicole Joseph
University of Illinois