

Dan Ruben
Executive Director, Equal Justice America
RE: Letter on Summer Fellowship Experience

August 9, 2016

Mr. Ruben,

My summer experience working at the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society (CVLAS) in Petersburg was excellent. The employees and clients that I worked with taught me many valuable lessons about the law and the people in our community. Although our clients have many of the same legal problems as people with greater incomes, they lack the ability to pay for the same legal representation and advice. The services provided by the CVLAS empower countless members of our community, and it was truly an honor to help represent these clients.

Among other issues, the CVLAS assists clients with Protective Order cases and the divorce, child support, spousal support, and child custody issues that stem from these cases. Within my first week at the CVLAS, I was surprised at the frequency of these cases. I began to realize that it was sometimes shockingly difficult to obtain a permanent Protective Order for our clients.

This fact became very clear to me during one of the Protective Order cases that I worked on this summer. For the purposes of this story, I will call the client Lily. On June 4, 2016, Lily and her boyfriend of one month were moving into a house together. Lily was excited about the new relationship until things took a turn for the worse that night. Lily was physically assaulted by her boyfriend and was terrified. She suffered from depression, anxiety, and PTSD, and all of these conditions worsened after the attack. On June 8, 2016, Lily courageously went to the police to obtain an Emergency Protective Order (EPO) and to press charges against her boyfriend.

The permanent Protective Order hearing was set for June 24, 2016, and Lily was incredibly nervous. This was the first time that she would see her attacker since she obtained the EPO. During the trial, Lily and two of her friends testified on her behalf. Her attacker did not testify, but a friend and some family members did. Despite Lily's testimony and pictures of her injuries, the judge denied Lily's request for a Protective Order because he found the fact that she waited four days to report her attack suspicious. Lily was distraught and terrified that her attacker could potentially harm her again.

Lily made a timely appeal to the Circuit Court and a new hearing was scheduled for August 3, 2016. I was hopeful that a new judge would understand that every victim reacts differently to abuse. This judge found that an incident of family abuse had occurred but did not see a need for Lily to have a permanent Protective Order against her aggressor. Lily was denied legal protection, and the fact that this judge

merely believed her testimony and pictures provided little comfort. Lily's financial situation did not cause the domestic abuse that she experienced, but it affected her ability to hire a civil attorney to help her. The CVLAS provides civil legal aid to individuals like Lily, free of charge.

Before I worked at the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society this summer, I was naïve about the number of individuals that needed our assistance. Many of these individuals are taken advantage of by individuals with access to money and legal resources. These power inequalities leave many individuals in our community homeless, in large amounts of debt, or without the protection of Protection Orders. I am incredibly thankful to Equal Justice America for providing me with the financial support to have the opportunity to work with, help, and learn from these clients.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lucinda James".

Lucinda James
University of Richmond School of Law
May 2017

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October 10, 2016

VIA E-MAIL

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

Dear Dan:

On behalf of Central Virginia Legal Aid Society (CVLAS), I want to thank Equal Justice America for funding University of Richmond law student Lucy James to work at our Petersburg office over the course of the summer. Lucy worked with me in the Petersburg office from May 23, 2016 through August 12, 2016. With Lucy's assistance, I was able to provide more and better free civil legal services to our community's most vulnerable populations.

During her time at CVLAS, Lucy assisted me with numerous housing law, family law, domestic violence, elder law, and consumer law cases. Under my supervision Lucy researched legal questions, drafted correspondence and court documents, interviewed clients, and accompanied me to court proceedings. In particular, Lucy showed great passion for my family law and domestic violence clients and did a great job making sure I was prepared to provide them with the best possible representation. The fellowship also benefited Lucy as she gained significant practical legal experience and saw the great need for free legal services that exists in the Tri-cities and the surrounding counties.

The funding provided by Equal Justice America allowed Lucy to make the commute from Richmond to Petersburg every day without the worry of the added financial costs. As I have mentioned, it is difficult to attract law students to work in Petersburg due to the greater number of opportunities available in Richmond and other cities that do not involve lengthy commutes.

If you have any questions or concerns, please call me at (804) 518-2128 or send me an e-mail at chrish@cvlas.org. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Christopher P. Bernhardt
Staff Attorney

