

August 17, 2015

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

Mr. Ruben:

As I near the end of my time this summer at the Delaware Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), I am writing to report on my experience, and to express my appreciation for the Equal Justice America fellowship I received.

I was drawn to OCA for a few reasons: first, because I wanted to observe and better understand child advocacy work from the perspective of attorney guardians *ad litem*; and second, because OCA not only advocates for children in the courtroom, but also through policy work and outreach. I am pleased to report that this summer was full of opportunities in both of these areas. I met with youth who are represented by OCA, attended numerous court proceedings, engaged with many different stakeholders involved in the lives of these children (parents, foster care families, social workers, etc.), and conducted legal research around issues and legislation affecting the lives of vulnerable children.

One case stands out. On my first day at OCA, I arrived early so that I could attend the first of a two-day termination of parental rights hearing. The children involved were two-year old twin girls who were removed from the custody of their natural parents following multiple, very serious, unexplained injuries to the girls. Throughout those two days, I met the twins' foster parents and saw how much they loved the girls. I watched as the twins' mother, who only very recently "aged out" of foster care herself, testified about how hard she had tried to improve her life so that the twins could return to her. I sat in a small room with the twins' mother, father, and their attorneys, as the guardian *ad litem* explained how an involuntary, as opposed to voluntary, termination of parental rights could negatively affect the parents in the future. Ultimately, the court ordered the involuntary termination of those parents' rights to the twins; just this week, the office is preparing documents to respond to the parents' appeal.

In the same vein, I have engaged in legal research around the state's constitutional obligation toward "parenting wards" – youth in foster care who become parents themselves. As a result of that research, I developed a memorandum, discussing the various points at which a state's interaction with this unique population warrants careful consideration. The opportunity to

explore this topic, while observing such a personal first-hand illustration of it, has been both meaningful and insightful.

Getting to know youth in care, from infants to teenagers, and learning their stories has highlighted for me the complexity of the issues surrounding this kind of child advocacy. With each case, I have tried to examine the situation from different perspectives – child, parent, social worker, state – and consider what truly is “in the child’s best interest.” By working alongside the tireless attorneys at OCA as they undergo the same analysis, I have benefited immensely from their insight and expertise.

Please know that I am sincerely grateful for the fellowship I received from EJA this summer; this internship has been an invaluable step in my academic and professional path.

Sincerely,

Annika Jones  
University of Pennsylvania Law School  
Expected graduation, May 2017