

August 31, 2017

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This summer, I had the great privilege of working as the Summer Fellow for the Immigration and Human Rights Clinic at the University of the District of Columbia David A. Clarke School of Law. I was privileged to be able to work with my supervisor, Lindsay M. Harris. Not only is she a phenomenal clinic instructor, but she's also an amazing advocate and mentor. Professor Harris has taught me a great deal, and not just about immigration law, but simply how to be a better advocate and person. My most important takeaway from this summer, however, has been my humbling experience working with each of my clients.

As the Summer Fellow, I was tasked with managing and advancing several clients' cases. This involved meeting with clients, completing immigration forms, researching country conditions, drafting declarations, and legal research. The most valuable experience I gained was from my interaction with my clients. My clients are all victims of persecution and faced truly traumatic, life-altering experiences. Despite their circumstances, they live their lives courageously and with great optimism for their futures.

One of my first clients was Maria,<sup>1</sup> a Honduran mother of four whose husband physically abused her repeatedly. Her husband had a serious substance abuse issue, which caused him to violently beat my client almost daily. On several occasions, her husband threatened her life and the life of her children. Sometimes he held a gun to her head, other times he threatened to burn her and her children alive. To make matters worse, he was likely affiliated with the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, a transnational criminal organization that has control over vast swaths of territory in the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala). Her husband also had connections with local law enforcement, preventing my client from being able to reasonably rely upon police assistance.

When I first met her, she was eager to get to work on her case and remove her ankle monitor. Ankle monitors are placed on undocumented immigrants to ensure they appear for their removal proceedings. She expressed frustration and embarrassment when we spoke about the ankle monitor because she was seen as an "other" and often got looks from people if they noticed the monitor.

Knowing her goals, we immediately began advocating to ICE officers that her ankle monitor be removed. We argued that our client was a single mother raising her two children in the U.S. and that she had no intention of leaving or not appearing for her hearing. Additionally, we conveyed our client's story, illustrating the persecution she suffered at the hands of her spouse. Fortunately, we

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<sup>1</sup> All names of clients have been altered to ensure confidentiality.

convinced the ICE officers that our client didn't need to have the ankle monitor and it was removed before the end of the summer. In addition, her asylum claim was filed (early) with the Immigration Court, so that she could be entitled to her work authorization permit earlier.

The next client I'm going to speak about has been the client that most inspired me this summer. My client is a female from Uganda named Alice who suffered a series of traumatic incidents, leaving her scarred and struggling to find hope in life. Her story is far too extensive to lay out in a two-page letter, but know that she was raped on two occasions, witnessed the brutal killing of her husband while being held at knife point, and attacked by people hired by the opposing political party. Alice is an incredibly strong woman who, despite her troubling past, remains determined to make a better life for herself.

This summer, Alice and I embarked on a journey through her dark past. My initial interaction with my client proved difficult for me. She had written her story down as best she could. When I read her story (more than 12 pages in length) I had to take breaks in between, to truly appreciate its disturbing details. More than shocked, I felt sick after reading her story. This feeling continued throughout most of our meetings. Fortunately, I became cognizant of the effect my client was having on me and began preparing myself for each meeting. I intentionally broke her story down into chapters, informed the client which chapter we would be going over, and reviewed the chapter the day before to come to terms with some traumatic experiences.

The most important thing I took from my experience this summer is how to better deal with secondary trauma. I understood the emotions I felt throughout the summer came as a result of my own past experiences, in addition to witnessing my clients' emotions as they described their own traumatic experiences. This summer has been incredibly difficult, but I would not have changed anything. I am grateful for having known and helped each of my clients. I am humbled by having known these courageous individuals who are simply seeking a safe environment to live in.

I met my summer goals while working as the Summer Fellow for the Immigration and Human Rights Clinic. However, the experience I envisioned I would have during the summer changed as my summer went on. I deliberately took time to try to understand and live in my clients' situations, either through reviewing their stories or doing research on their respective country's conditions. This summer further confirmed my desire to practice immigration law in the future, especially asylum law.

Sincerely,

Jason Barros