

August 25, 2017

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

This summer I had the pleasure of working at the Allegheny County Bar Foundation Pro Bono Center. The Pro Bono Center is a branch of the Allegheny County Bar Association which helps serve individuals throughout the Pittsburgh community who cannot afford legal services. Their work includes helping assist with divorces, custody matters, Protection from Abuse actions, expungements, landlord tenant issues, other housing issues, name changes, and wills and estate planning, among other things. Through my work with the Pro Bono Center, I got to serve many clients and learn many legal skills I will use for years to come.

Through all of the work I was able to do, the cases that stood out to me the most were the Protection from Abuse cases. I had the opportunity to observe, and eventually represent clients, at multiple hearings. These cases stood out to me because helping these people can truly change their lives and help them get out of a terrible situation. All of our clients were the victims of domestic violence seeking protection, generally from a partner or former partner. These clients were truly afraid for their safety and being able to help them feel a little better was very rewarding. The cycle of domestic violence is terrible and it is incredibly hard for victims to get out of the situation. On average, it takes a victim of domestic violence seven times before they leave their partner for good. A victim is in the most danger when they leave. The courage I saw from these victims was inspiring. To leave the situation and stand up for themselves truly takes an enormous amount of courage and I was lucky and happy to be able to assist them in some way.

A good number of the clients I helped were upset with the legal system, especially those involved in family law matters. A lot of them had been through the process before and felt defeated. The most defeated group I saw were those who had at some point suffered from drug addiction. Many of the victims of domestic violence I saw had at one point been addicted. I saw many clients who were now clean for several years but still felt like the court was stigmatizing them, especially when they were alleging domestic violence or dealing with custody issues. Having grown up in an area where drug addiction is very widespread, this is an issue very near to my heart. Being able to talk to these clients and hear their stories was very inspiring. All of the clients I worked with aspired to be better and stay clean, for the sake of themselves and oftentimes their children. Being able to help these people, especially because helping those with drug addictions is something I am very passionate about, was very rewarding, even if I was only able to help in a small way.

I am so grateful the Allegheny County Bar Foundation gave me this opportunity over the summer. I am also very thankful that Equal Justice America helped me be able to accept such a wonderful opportunity. I had a very wonderful experience over the summer and learned more than I ever could have imagined.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Joelle Shanesy
Duquesne University School of Law
Expected Graduation, May 2018