

30 August 2012

Dan Ruben

Equal Justice America

Re: Equal Justice Fellowship

Dear Mr. Ruben

This summer, I was able to work with the Public Housing Unit at Community Legal Services in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I was nervous about starting because CLS has a reputation of being a dynamic and influential organization which makes a difference in the lives of thousands of people each year. How was I meant to contribute their mission of individual service and policy change as a first-year law student with little but enthusiasm to offer? After completing my fellowship, I now appreciate the importance of the work done at CLS even more. I now recognize that social change does not happen in the newspapers, nor will the revolution be televised, but people like the lawyers at CLS make a difference every day.

Most of the clients in the Public Housing Unit come through a walk-in intake process. Cases range from issues that can be solved with a phone call to a landlord, to issues that require weeks of investigation and eventual visits to municipal court. Kevin Dorsey was my first client at CLS. I met Mr. Dorsey in my second week. Mr. Dorsey had been homeless for a number of years before transitioning through a shelter into Section 8 housing. He felt as though he had been given a second chance and was not willing to let anything rob him of his opportunity to get his life back on track. He paid his bills on time, was a respectful neighbor, and abided by the rules and regulations of the Philadelphia Housing Authority. Unfortunately, Mr. Dorsey did not know that failing to recertify his income with the Housing Authority could lead to eviction. He was surprised when Section 8 stopped making payments to his landlord and he found himself back on the street after only a few months in his new apartment. I realized that many of the people I interacted with in my fellowship were in a position to need my help because they do not have a complete enough knowledge of the system that dictates their lives to solve small issues that eventually balloon into seemingly insurmountable problems. I was able to schedule a hearing for Mr. Dorsey a week after he came to CLS and he was re-instated into the Housing Voucher Programme days after that. Had it not been for CLS, Mr. Dorsey would have been denied housing for which he was eligible. He was as appreciative of the help we had given him as I was to have been allowed to help.

My role as a law student often frustrated me. I often found that the law is a language that is very foreign to many low-income tenants. I acted as an interpreter; someone who was willing to explain a tenant's rights and responsibilities to them. At times, I felt that my role should not be necessary. I questioned a system that exists where so many of the people for whom it exists have no idea how it

works. Why should the housing authority fear public interest lawyers more than the thousands of citizens they serve? How would the housing authority be held accountable if not for us? I found one case to be especially frustrating. Elle Caple's family had lived in a scattered-site housing unit for more than 40 years; she assumed the lease when her mother passed away. Ms. Caple's whole family had been raised in that house, and as anyone else would, she called it home. I met Ms. Caple after she had received a termination notice because mail for her son and two brothers was coming to her home. The PHA had determined that because people not on the lease received some mail at the house, Ms. Caple was allowing people not on the lease to live in her unit. This struck me because my brother, sister, and I, all still receive mail at my mother's house; as a private tenant, my mother has never had to answer for the names on the letters that come to her home. My supervisor was able to reason with the PHA attorney and Ms. Caple was allowed to stay in her home, but it was a frightening reminder of how uncertain the life of low-income individuals in Philadelphia can be. Had Ms. Caple been aware of the (not so commonsense) rules surrounding her tenancy, she could have been able to speak up for herself.

Overall, my experience at CLS this summer was amazing. I could never have imagined the amount of trust the lawyers, paralegals and clients would have in me as a first year law student. I was able to research law, investigate cases, communicate and negotiate directly with lawyers, and was treated as an integral part of the team. My clients were very rarely dealing with just one problem; public housing law intertwined with many other areas of law as well. I learned how public benefits law, energy law, bankruptcy law and family law all intertwine to affect my clients. While not all of the people who sat across from me in my office were completely sympathetic, I learned that the most common story was that of a person just trying to survive in an inhospitable world. I encountered people who would have had nowhere else to turn had it not been for us, and each time a client thanked me or hugged me, I understood what our presence meant to them. All people at some point in time need help, it just happens to be that people with low income need help navigating the law to ensure they have access to the most basic of human necessities. I felt thankful to be able to translate my legal education into a positive result for my clients. Each client I spoke to could just as easily been a member of my own family, the only difference being that my family members had the safety net of someone around them to fall into before an uneasy situation got bad.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to rediscover why I want to work in the world of public interest. Law school had alienated me from the rest of the world a little bit, and I was seeing the world in terms of case law instead of real experiences. This fellowship has reaffirmed for me the importance of balance in society.

Sincerely,

Maanda T. Makwarela

Law Student, Earle Mack School of Law at Drexel University

Expected graduation in May 2014