

August 19, 2016

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I cannot thank you or Equal Justice America enough for helping me to work for Greater Boston Legal Services this summer. I have grown tremendously in my legal skills, especially in client work and advocacy. I have also grown in my humility and respect for the vastness of the legal need in the world, and the strength of the people who tirelessly fill that need. I understand that you are one of them Mr. Ruben, and I thank you for it. While at Greater Boston Legal Services I had the opportunity to work with a diverse set of clients with unique, but often dishearteningly similar legal needs. The cases I handled fell roughly into two categories: housing and benefits. In housing cases I helped to slow and defend against evictions of elders living in subsidized housing, who often would have no other place to go if they lost their homes. Benefits cases varied tremendously, but all involved clients who were faced with the fiendishly complex Social Security system. The common theme throughout all cases was how complex and alienating the legal system is, even for someone with years of education and specialized training, and especially for someone without those things.

In one housing case, the management company wanted to evict an elderly tenant for having a long-term guest, in violation of her lease. The guest was the client's daughter, and the reason she had been spending nights with the client was because the client had suffered a stroke, followed by a cancer diagnosis, and needed both physical and psychological help with her illness. By the time the client came to us, however, the daughter was no longer spending nights with the client at all. I drafted a letter to the management company, requesting reasonable accommodation and carefully explaining the ways in which they had failed to properly evict a subsidized tenant. The letter sparked a response from the management company, and they will now meet with us and the client to discuss the situation. More than that though, the letter gave the client peace of mind, that a sheriff would not be knocking down her door to throw her out of her home, and that the management had to face lawyers, her lawyers, first before they could evict her for something she thought was fundamentally unfair. The case will be ongoing when I leave GBLS, but the client is more secure in her home, and management is more open to talking, because of legal work that I was able to do.

Another client stands out who did not necessarily need legal work, but did need an advocate. The client's husband had had a massive stroke last October and became completely disabled. The hospital where he was kept set itself up as the representative payee for his social security retirement benefits, without giving notice to his wife. This meant that the hospital would receive

all of his benefits directly, cutting out his wife completely. As far as the client knew, her husband's benefits had simply stopped. To make matters that much worse, the client spoke almost no English, only Spanish. I helped the client fill out a form to get information on behalf of her husband from Social Security. Then, we went together to the local office. The representative was reluctant to share information, or allow the wife to make any changes, even though she should have taken priority to be a representative payee over the hospital. Ultimately though, we convinced the agent to allow the client to set herself up as representative payee instead of the hospital that very day. The client now receives her husband's benefits herself, which allowed her to take her husband out of the hospital, which is what he wanted, and bring him to live at home where she can care for him. All the client really needed was an intermediary, who could speak both Spanish and Social Security. Even though it wasn't exactly legal work, it turned out that I was exactly the person this client needed. In that moment I felt like a true advocate, even if it was just to help with one small hurdle for someone who had far more important challenges to face.

My time at Greater Boston Legal Services was as much defined by client work as it was by the systemic advocacy that both my direct supervisors did. Wynn Gerhard has been working throughout the summer, and long before that, on a public guardian statute for Massachusetts. I was lucky enough to be invited to almost every meeting Wynn had related to that advocacy. Through those meetings I got to see the slow, painstaking process through which good laws get passed. I also got to see how advocates give themselves for years to causes that they believe in, and work in the most detailed, grinding ways to make their visions reality. Each meeting between advocates moved the process forward in incremental, almost imperceptible ways. In the beginning of the summer there was no bill and no legislative strategy. Today though, there is a bill that will be ready to file in January, with an ever-growing coalition ready to support it. In those meetings, I gained an understanding of how government moves forward on the most granular level. And most importantly I saw the dedication of the advocates who must be the ones to move it.

Thanks to you, Equal Justice America, and thanks to Greater Boston Legal Services, I will be a better lawyer than I could possibly have been otherwise. I had a chance to find out how little I know about working with clients, and what a lifelong process it will be to develop that skill. I also got to come face to face with both the grand scale and the individual suffering of those who the law cannot help because they cannot access it. The people at Greater Boston Legal Services try every day to lift that entire world of people up into true equality before the law, and hold it there on the strength of their own shoulders. That, to me, is advocacy. An understanding of that world, and the fundamental need to bring justice to it, is something I will take with me for the rest of my legal career. For that, I thank you.

Sincerely,

Michael J. Moreshead
Northeastern University School of Law
Class of 2018