

NORA GRAIS-CLEMENTS

Dan Ruben, Executive Director  
Equal Justice America

August 11, 2010

Dear Mr. Ruben:

My placement for the summer was at New Haven Legal Assistance, Association (NHLAA), in New Haven, CT. I worked within the family law unit at NHLAA, primarily with two attorneys in the unit, one of whom works largely with undocumented immigrant survivors of domestic violence, in assisting them in filing for immigration status. The attorneys I worked with were incredibly skilled and compassionate and I learned from each of them both similarities and differences in their styles of lawyering. I found them to be incredible role models as incredibly dedicated and competent attorneys and felt it to be of great assistance to me in moving forward in my career to have witnessed such devoted attorneys also balancing their home lives and children with their work.

During the 10 weeks I worked at NHLAA, I primarily assisted monolingual Spanish-speaking clients (though I did serve a few English-speakers as well). It was a fantastic opportunity for me to use my Spanish skills in the legal context and to rebuild my legal Spanish vocabulary. My ability to translate in Spanish for non-Spanish speaking attorneys also helped NHLAA in being able to assist a greater number of Spanish-speaking clients over the summer.

My work focused on both immigration and family law. In the family law context, I learned about the process for obtaining a divorce in Connecticut, as well as the procedure for applying for a restraining order and/or custody in a domestic violence case. I represented one Spanish-speaking client in her restraining order hearing, which was granted. In one case, where the attorney on the case was representing our client in her divorce & custody actions, I worked at length with the client on drafting and applying successfully for a restraining order when her husband began to stalk her. After several endless days in court, the restraining order was finally granted and the client felt very relieved.

In terms of immigration, I worked with clients to draft affidavits describing the abuses they suffered (primarily translated from Spanish to English) and also interviewed numerous friends/family/therapists, etc. of each client and draft supporting affidavits from each of them to bolster the VAWA and U-Visa applications. I advocated with police investigators to obtain U-Visa Certifications attesting to one client's helpfulness in the investigation of the crimes perpetrated against her and succeeded in obtaining a U-Visa Certification for her immigration application. On one case, I worked with an attorney in editing her Motion to Re-consider (for a client who was facing deportation proceedings) and traveled to Immigration Court to file this and another motion on the case.

I attended six brown bag lunch "teach-ins" led by attorneys in other departments at NHLAA to learn about their work (including the history of NHLAA & Legal Services in CT, housing law, health care, and benefits law, unemployment law, and computer programs for pro-se advise in CT). I also attended and helped to lead an Immigration Law training at TEAM in Ansonia, CT, along with my supervising attorney. I attended the opening of the Umbrella Services new office and also met with clients in their office. Additionally, I met with Immigration attorneys from Greater Hartford Legal Aid and Connecticut Legal Services and learned from them some of the issues that arise in practicing immigration law. For this group, I also compiled a list of Civil Surgeons and provided information on the cost, availability, and language accessibility for each. These experiences were great networking opportunities and I feel that even in such a short time, I was able to build connections with a number of key players in the family and immigration bar in CT.

In all, it was an incredibly rich summer placement experience. I felt that I was able not only to serve a

large number of clients, but also to learn a tremendous amount in the process. For the women who we helped obtain immigration status I feel that we made an incredible difference in their lives especially. After suffering immensely and for long periods of time, these women finally are on the road to overcoming their abuse, and to having a leg to stand on with immigration status and the ability to work and support their children here in the U.S. These women in particular struck me as true survivors, and reinforced for me the reasons why I decided to come to law school initially -- to advocate on behalf of people who don't know or cannot realize on their own their legal rights, and to empower those same clients to advocate for themselves. This is the work that I witnessed at NHLAA each day I was there this summer.

Last, but not least, I'd like to share with you the following story of a woman I was particularly moved by during my time at NHLAA:

This client came to us towards the end of the day on a Monday afternoon for an appointment. She was monolingual Spanish-speaking, and her application said that she needed not only a divorce, and possibly and restraining order, but most importantly, that her children's father had snatched her two youngest children away (both under the age of 10) and she didn't know where they were. Their father refused to give her any information about their whereabouts and had also filed for full legal and physical custody the day after he took them (which was not granted, but the client didn't understand that before our explanation). The attorney who took her case and I sat with her until 6:30pm that night, listened to horrific accounts of domestic violence and sexual assault, and at the end of our meeting, agreed to meet with the client in the morning to help her to find her children.

The next day I went with the client in search of her children. It was clear to me throughout the day that both my ability to speak Spanish, as well as my presence and understanding of the situation (and ability to clearly explain that although the father had filed for custody, he did not have any greater rights to the children than did their mother, since the court had ordered only a hearing, and did not grant him temporary custody) were what enabled us to find and retrieve both children. Had the client tried again on her own, she probably would have been denied access to them prior to the hearing on custody. By the end of the day on Tuesday, the client had both of her children with her, and we had prepared an application for a restraining order for her and the children.

At the hearing on Thursday that same week, I spoke with the children's father and accompanied the parties to Family Relations. By agreement, the father agreed to the restraining order and limited visitation schedule with the children, and granted the mother (our client) full legal and physical custody of their joint children. This was an incredible success, for a woman who had been made to feel inferior throughout her relationship with this man to finally realize her rights and to feel supported by both her attorney and myself. She was in contact on several occasions after this court date and reported that visits were going as ordered. She now will continue to work with the attorneys at NHLAA on longer custody orders, as well as her immigration case (and those of her children).

Thank you so much for providing me with funding to pursue my internship this summer with NHLAA. It was incredibly rewarding, and so important as I continue to think about my long-term goals working in public interest law. Please feel free to be in touch with any questions.

Best,

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