

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I wish I could appropriately express my gratitude, as receiving an Equal Justice America fellowship allowed me to pursue a summer clerkship that will stay with me throughout my career. This summer I was privileged to clerk at Bay Area Legal Aid in their Santa Clara office. BayLegal serves those who cannot afford legal representation in civil matters by providing legal services at no cost. Their objective is to ensure that community members are adequately and fairly represented, despite economic inability to access legal services.

I was fortunate enough to work in the domestic violence, family law, and immigration unit. I assisted clients in completing applications for dissolutions, domestic violence restraining orders, child custody and visitation, financial support, and assisted in the division of debts and property. Additionally, I worked with clients who were survivors of domestic violence as they applied for U-Visa and VAWA immigrant status.

On my first full day in the office, I was assigned a full case load of about 13 clients. Of those 13, there are a few who I will never forget. One client came to us seeking a divorce and a domestic violence restraining order. Her husband physically and psychologically abused her from the beginning of their relationship. She was too afraid to call the authorities because he threatened to report her to Immigration Services as she was in the United States illegally. The precipitating event that finally caused her to seek help was when he choked her to the point that she lost consciousness, and their 7-year-old autistic child jumped on him to get him off. After she filed for a restraining order, he stalked her, published intimate photos of her on the internet, and threatened her family with violence. She was so afraid of him that she dropped her request for the restraining order multiple times. Her courage was incredible as she ultimately decided that pursuing the restraining order was going to be best for her child. After a month of preparing for trial, we successfully won her a 5-year domestic violence restraining order. I worked with my supervisor to prepare questions for direct examination, compiled witness and exhibit lists, and helped to prep our client for the trial. I cannot explain the look of relief and gratitude she gave us when we explained the judge's decision to her. She embraced us and nothing felt as important as watching our client leave the court house knowing that she and her child were safe.

I knew I was doing critical work when I got my final assignment of the summer. We were assisting a client in applying for a domestic violence restraining order. The day after the restraining order hearing while the client was in the car with her boyfriend, her abuser pulled up beside her and shot into her vehicle, killing her boyfriend. He was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. At the time, their child was 4 years old. Recently, the abuser requested joint legal custody and that his 6-year-old daughter be allowed to visit him in prison. The request blamed his incarceration on our client. After discussing all options with our client, her only concern was protecting her daughter from the damaging influence of the violent man,

and not undoing the years of therapy and counseling the little girl had undergone to recover from the trauma caused by the attack. My supervisor asked me to draft a motion asking the court to deny his request for visitation and joint legal custody. I was upset while writing the motion, saddened that one person would have to withstand so much. However, I reminded myself that I was helping to maintain some normalcy for an innocent child. I knew that my work was contributing to her and her mother's mental health and safety. When I reflect on this client and her experiences, I am in awe of her resilience, patience, understanding, gratitude, and kindness. I can only hope to carry some of that with me in my practice as an attorney.

My experience in the family law unit was immeasurably impactful and taught me lessons that I am forever grateful for. Through my work with these cases, I truly learned what it means to be an advocate, an ally, to be brave, and to be grateful. I have a better understanding of the obstacles low-income communities face on a daily basis. Because of my work with BayLegal, I feel a great responsibility and desire to pursue a career in public interest law. If it were not for Equal Justice America, I would not have been able to fully enjoy my summer clerkship. For that, I am truly grateful.

Very truly yours,

Melissa Fox
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J.D. Candidate 2018