

August 20, 2015

Daniel Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thanks to Equal Justice America's generous grant I was able to spend my summer in New Orleans working jointly with the District Attorney's Office and a non-profit called Community Mediation Services (CMS). Together, we created and delivered a summer program to underprivileged youth. The program was comprised of two, two-week sessions. Youth that participated in the first session were identified and referred to the program through FINS (Families in Need of Services). Most of the first session children were referred to the program because they had committed minor infractions, such as truancy or fighting, while others were referred solely because their families severely lacked resources. The second session youth were identified and referred to the program through diversion. The majority of the youth referred through diversion had committed status offenses, or an act that is considered illegal solely because of the child's status as a minor, others had committed drug offenses, and a smaller portion had committed violent crimes.

The program, as envisioned by Community Mediation Services, was to use restorative justice practices to help participating youth develop the skills necessary to stay out of the criminal justice system. However, for many reasons, the program in practice diverged quite substantially from this vision. In practice, the program ultimately helped youth build relationships with one another and program facilitators. While relationship building does not go directly to preventing involvement in the criminal justice system, indirectly I believe it does offer some safeguards.

The youth we worked with, coming from an area with one of the highest murder rates in the country, were raised to defend themselves at all costs. For example, one child explained that her mother told her from the time she was extremely young that if someone comes for you "you pick up a rock and bash that person's head in." In many privileged communities where violence is rare rather than commonplace what constitutes self-defense seems clear. However, surrounded by violence the lines are not so clear-cut for the youth we worked with. As one child explained it, if you do not fight back when someone disrespect you, you invite others to beat you up, and so you are better off just fighting the person that initially disrespects you.

As a result, when the youth first came to us they all presented as hardened and angry. Childhood for them seemed obsolete. Children as young as eleven were ready to throw down at the slightest insult. These protective personas, while arguably necessary in their everyday lives, made it very difficult for the children to maintain friendships with one another. One wrong word and friends were at each other's throats. In response, we created, or strived to create, a non-violent space where the stakes were low enough that children could safely build friendships, test each others' boundaries, and explore their own vulnerability.

Prohibited from fighting when angry, the children were often forced to sit with feelings of hurt and frustration. Dealing with these feelings in such an unfamiliar way, the children frequently needed to be escorted outside, so they could navigate such new territory in private with one-on-one support. Once outside, the youth would typically punch something before breaking down and crying. Some of our most valuable work happened during these times. One such interaction stands out in my mind even now. We worked with a girl of about fourteen who was extremely articulate, engaged and engaging, and who often acted as a role model for the other children, except when her temper got the best of her.

The interaction I recall so vividly occurred when this girl, knowing that she was on the verge of fighting another child, indicated to me that she needed to go outside. I escorted her, and once outside she quickly broke down crying. A conversation that started out about her frustrations with another child in the program quickly turned into a conversation about her grandfather who had passed away accompanied by frequent apologies for crying. After taking a few minutes to explain to her the importance of feeling these emotions and letting them out, we discussed the guilt she felt about not making her grandfather proud while he was alive and not treating him better.

Interestingly enough, I had experienced very similar guilt for many years after my great grandmother died. Accordingly, I shared with her the sentiments that had helped me the most in working through my own guilt. I expressed to her that her grandfather, once her age but also as a wise adult, surely recognized that she was simply a child at the time doing her best, and who loved her very much whether she had learned how to express it yet or not. I also explained that just like she had this experience with her grandfather, when she is a grandmother she will have the same compassion and understanding for her grandchildren. And lastly, I told her how proud I was of her for all the work she was doing in the program. To that point I added, the fact that she was not my child and I felt this proud, I could only imagine how proud her grandfather would be if he could see her. And that the absolute best thing she can do in working through her guilt is to continue enacting the lessons he taught her exactly as she had been doing in the program. This last point seemed to provide her the most comfort, as I do not think despite how remarkable of a human being this child is that she often heard adults say they were proud of her.

There is no concise way to explain what this work has meant to me. It means so many things. It showed me that no matter how much trauma and pain a person endures, their inner child never really dies but rather waits until it is safe to resurface. It pushed me to trust myself and my innate humanness, as authenticity is the only thing children will accept and connect with. It also showed me that the growth we strive for in childhood remains our life's work, and reaching adulthood is never a reason to stop growing. Lastly, it reminded me that no matter how sad and unfair this world is, we always have the option of carving out spaces for joy, human connection, and compassion.

Warmly,



Sarah Manasevit

Berkeley Law

J.D. Candidate 2016



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2 July 2015

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Re: Sarah Manasevit

Dear Mr. Ruben:

You have requested a letter evaluating Ms. Manasevit's fellowship. First you must understand the challenges that she encountered. Her fellowship was to support our work with youth in the juvenile justice system. We have a summer camp that runs every day 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. The camp is not a sports camp, but designed to enhance the youth's social skills, build self-esteem, and introduce alternative dispute resolution models including restorative practices. It is an extremely stressful fellowship, especially for Sarah who had little direct knowledge of the culture of our youth in New Orleans. Sarah would be exhausted at the end of each day, but came back refreshed every morning.

Sarah -- a white, privileged woman from Washington, D.C., successfully connected with our youth -- mostly African-Americans from neighborhoods where violence and poverty prevail. Her ability to gain their trust in a short time is a tribute to her willingness to accept, support, and respect each individual young person on their own merits.

The camp included a series of workshops each day intended to address the goals of the program. In this, Sarah took a leadership role successfully facilitating a number of activities over the period of her fellowship. She was a full partner in the project.

I am grateful for the support extended to her by Equal Justice America. Her presence was a major contribution to the success of the program.

With appreciation,

Lou Furman

Promoting and Providing  
Mediation and Restorative Practices



# Community Mediation Services

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Executive Director

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