

August 31, 2014

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I write with sincere appreciation for the opportunity to serve as an Equal Justice America summer fellow. The financial support provided by the Equal Justice America Summer Fellowship enabled me to spend this summer providing legal assistance to low-wage immigrant workers with the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice. The experience deepened my understanding of legal services work and my commitment to a career in this field.

My biggest assignment this summer was providing legal assistance to a group of Jamaican guestworkers who were survivors of involuntary servitude and forced labor. I helped to prepare and file U-visa applications for four guestworkers to enable them to remain in the U.S. to assist with ongoing investigations into the workplace crimes committed against them and to enable them to achieve stability to rebuild their lives.

I was struck by the courage and tenacity of spirit of each guestworker I worked with, but the story of one in particular has remained strong in my mind. One guestworker I worked with was a middle-aged woman who grew up very poor in a small town in Jamaica. She went to high school and a training program for hotel housekeeping, but there was rarely enough work in Jamaica for her to make a steady living. Eventually, the pressure of providing for her daughter and ailing mother on such a meager income made her consider traveling to the U.S. to earn more money.

A recruiting agency in Jamaica promised her steady work and decent wages for cleaning hotel rooms for a company in the U.S. through the H-2B guestworker program. However, she had to pay for her travel expenses, visa, and first month's rent upfront, which quickly added up to almost \$2,000. She had to borrow almost all of this sum, which is a risky move in Jamaica, where creditors can repossess debtors' homes or even have them thrown in jail. The guestworker took this risk because she was told she would easily make enough money to repay her debt and still take money home.

When she arrived in the U.S., conditions were not as the guestworker had been promised. She lived in a crowded, unfurnished apartment and was not given enough work hours to even cover rent. When this happened, she and other guestworkers were given \$0 paychecks and sometimes told they still owed money for rent. When some of the guestworkers complained about the situation, their managers threatened to have them arrested and deported, and

blacklisted with Immigration so they could never return to the U.S as guestworkers. In response, guestworkers eventually went on strike and sought help from the U.S. Department of Labor.

I was humbled by the strength and courage of all the guestworkers I worked with, who risked their security to stand up for justice against their abusive employer. But the story of this particular guestworker has stuck with me because I was so impressed by her desire to keep fighting despite the incredible trauma she endured. She felt trapped by her situation, unable to return to Jamaica even after escaping her employer because of the huge debt she owed. Her mother's health was failing and she soon passed away. This worker was, tragically, unable to return home to help care for her mother or even attend her funeral. And yet, she continued to speak out about the injustice she and other guestworkers had suffered.

By helping these guestworkers file for U-visas, I helped them to hopefully achieve stability in the U.S. to be able to work off their debt, build financial security, and perhaps one day return to their families in Jamaica. Allowing these workers to stay in the U.S. was also an important goal for preventing this kind of workplace abuse from happening to other guestworkers. These workers have continued to help the U.S. Department of Labor in investigating these workplace abuses, and have brought national media and political attention to the exploitation that far too many H-2B guestworkers experience.

My summer in New Orleans was a shot in the arm for me, rejuvenating my commitment to practicing law in the service of the most marginalized individuals and communities. My experience with the Jamaican guestworkers was a sobering reminder of the courage it takes to seek help and stand up against injustice – a lesson I am not soon to forget as I move forward in my career. Finally, my experience demonstrated for me how legal services can play an important role in a broader movement for social justice. The legal assistance I provided to the guestworkers helped them to remain in the U.S. where they can be a strong voice for justice, educating others about the dangerous and degrading working conditions far too many low-wage immigrant workers face.

My summer internship with the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice was personally formative and incredibly educational. My experience would not have been possible without the support of an Equal Justice America Summer Fellowship, and for this I am deeply grateful.

Sincerely,

Tim Shadix
J.D. Candidate, 2016
UC Berkeley School of Law