

August 10, 2016

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer I had the privilege of working at Bay Area Legal Aid in its Housing Unit. My work entailed both eviction defense and subsidy preservation. Twice a week I assisted in our Housing Law Clinic. During the Clinic, community members would come to the courthouse for assistance with their Unlawful Detainer cases. We assessed their situation and helped them fill out and file Answers, Demurrers, Stay of Executions, Reasonable Accommodations, or any other documentation their situation required. Clinic days were always intense, and there was never a pause between clinic participants. In one day, I could help up to about six people. However, tenants rarely knew their rights and often, landlords took advantage of this. For every person I worked with, there were so many more who were being evicted without a fight. The court system is skewed towards landlords, making it far too easy to force families and children into homelessness. For instance, tenants only have five days to file an Answer to a Summons and Complaint. Prior to this summer I would have no idea where to even begin that process, much less actually complete it competently. If I, a member of a very small and very privileged group of individuals with a legal education, did not know how to complete an Answer, how are our nation's most vulnerable populations expected to be able to do so?

I still remember the first person I ever helped at Clinic. She was a domestic abuse survivor, and a single mother of two minor children. Her abuser had taken her money and her possessions and had abandoned their children. She had come to the Clinic because she had received a lockout notice from the Sheriff informing her that the lockout would take place next week. Looking through her paperwork I realized she had received a default judgment. Without the ability or the knowledge to file an answer, she was stripped of her day in court. The landlord, with no pushback as to the merits of his case, was able to put a mother and her children out of their home. Moreover, the woman now had an eviction on her record, which would make it nearly impossible for her to secure another home. We decided to write a Stay of Execution that day, and I worked with the participant to convey her story and plead with the judge to allow her just a little bit more time in the home. When we finished, she thanked me and left to file the Stay. BayLegal simply doesn't have the resources to represent every tenant who needs help. So, because the participant was not a client, I never found out if her Stay was granted and I have no idea what happened to her family. Yes, we need major systemic reforms, but we also simply need more lawyers to go into this work and serve indigent people. There are not enough lawyers in this field, and because of that, incredible women like the woman I met that day, are not being served justly. My summer at BayLegal only solidified my commitment to serve vulnerable communities.

As heartbreaking as Legal Aid work can be, there were also moments of pure joy. We had a client who is a single mother of two young boys, one of which has learning disabilities. Her Section 8 Voucher was at risk of termination because she had failed to report income, which the Housing Authority (HA) considered fraud. Of course, she had attempted to report said income, but when the HA did not answer her questions about how to report cash income, she assumed she did not have to report it at all. She had been a part of the program for six years at this point and had no previous

violations. I wrote a Position Statement on her behalf requesting that in light of her son's disabilities, the HA reverse the proposed termination. Her son's health would be negatively impacted if he was to experience homelessness, and the request was highly reasonable because our client was willing to pay all the money she owed. The day before the hearing our client and her mother came in to the office so we could prepare them. The love she had for her children filled the whole room when she spoke about her desire to protect them. We all were moved to tears as she expressed her fears about losing her voucher. The next day as we waited outside the HA, our client's hands were shaking and she said she was so nervous to speak in front of everyone. My Supervising Attorney calmed our client and made her feel safe and confident in her ability to tell her story. After a very long few weeks, we received the email from the HA stating that our client would be allowed to remain in the Section 8 Program. I'll never forget our client's voice when I called her to tell her the great news. She was overjoyed and so thankful. Weeks later, I still find happiness from that moment.

I have never felt so fulfilled until doing this work. This summer I am proud to know I have helped prevent people from losing their homes and that I have contributed positive work. I found purpose this summer, and for that I will always be grateful to Bay Area Legal Aid and to EJA for helping support me on this journey.

Sincerely,

Maya Iyyani
University of Virginia School of Law
May 2018

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August 29, 2016

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 E Boundary Rd.
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

During this summer, Mike Srstka, a law student at the University of Virginia, worked as an intern for the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society's Charlottesville office. As the office's senior managing attorney I oversaw Mike's work, which was focused primarily on civil advocacy for low-income clients. I found him to be compassionate, professional, humble, and hard-working. Mike greatly aided us in delivering legal services to the low-income and vulnerable clients we serve. I would like to thank Equal Justice America for providing him financial assistance during the summer.

CVLAS offers its law students interns the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in client interaction. When a case was first presented to me by our intake staff, Mike would contact the necessary parties to develop a factual record. Subsequently, he would determine, research, and analyze any legal issues presented by the case and provide me with a plan as to how he believed we could best serve a client's needs. Following my review, Mike would act as my direct liaison to the client, and he would articulate to them in plain language their options and any associated risk-reward tradeoff. Mike would continue to keep in contact with clients throughout their case to keep them abreast of any developments. I regularly received positive comments from our clients on how professionally and effectively Mike responded to their questions and concerns. In this regard, having Mike intern at our office allowed for us to provide exceptionally personalized service to our clients.

We were able to utilize Mike in trial preparation as well. This summer, I represented a client in a child custody dispute that went to trial. Mike interviewed the primary witnesses multiple times and helped me develop a comprehensive list of direct examination questions. He also sat in on my meetings with the witnesses and took excellent notes. He collaborated with another law student intern, Sam Yergin, and drafted opening and closing statements. Mike also helped me anticipate cross examination questions. In the end, we were extremely pleased with the result, as we received a positive result for our client following trial. In other cases, Mike also assisted me in various tasks including drafting motions, writing letters to clients and adverse parties, and filing court documents.



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During the summer, I found Mike to be reliable and hard-working. He always showed up on time, met deadlines, and completed the tasks I assigned to him. He never complained about picking up the phone and calling difficult clients or adverse parties. He went the extra mile for our clients, as he was always willing to communicate with them in detail and even providing transportation in one instance. Mike also joined our Virginia Farm Workers Program on multiple trips across the state to ensure that migrant workers are aware of their rights under state and federal law, and that they have access to adequate housing and medical care.

Our office is grateful for Mike's hard work and commitment this summer, and especially for the funding which made his presence possible. We look forward to hosting more Equal Justice America Fellows in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robin Edwards". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Robin Edwards