

Dear Mr. Ruben:

As cheesy and cliched as this may sound, the 2008 election, and my discovery of a little-known TV show called "The West Wing," showed me my path in life—public service, specifically governmental public service. From there, my interest naturally shifted to the role of the law in shaping our everyday way of life, and law school became my means to fulfilling my lifelong goal of serving the public.

But while I may desire a life in public service, without Equal Justice America, I could not have spent my summer serving the poorest citizens in Petersburg, Virginia with the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society. EJA's generous funding impacted me and the Petersburg community by providing me the opportunity and by providing CVLAS another staff member.

During my ten weeks at Central Virginia Legal Aid Society in Petersburg, I got to see a lot of different areas of law at play in people's lives—ranging from custody and visitation cases to unemployment compensation cases to landlord-tenant cases. However, no matter the case or client, the outcomes were always impactful on the client's life and livelihood, or that of their child(ren). While much of my work impacted my view of the world, or my understanding of the role the law and the judiciary play in our lives every day, there are a few cases that stand out.

The majority of the landlord-tenant disputes I helped with this summer involved a failure of the landlord to fix a repair and the resulting withholding of rent, or the renegeing of a landlord on some sort of promise to the tenant. This meant dealing with a lot of "slumlords." My first encounter with one of these bad landlords came in my first few weeks on the job. My supervisor was representing a client whose landlord had promised to return a \$3500 deposit if the client moved out of the rented house following the inability of the parties to resolve a repairs issues. Our client left as asked, but the landlord refused to return the deposit. I was tasked with researching all arguments for and against the return of the deposit. In the end, I am not sure how much my hours of research on contracts, mutual mistake, and equitable estoppel affected the judge, but all that mattered was the judgment in our client's favor. With that money, he had the opportunity to find a new home. Without it, he would have struggled to afford a place to live.

In another case, the "bad landlord" was a privately owned, public housing apartment complex for the elderly and disabled. Our client, who was disabled, had his application removed from the waiting list because of an old misdemeanor drug charge. Seventeen years prior to his application, he was convicted of possessing marijuana, a conviction for which he paid a fine and temporarily lost his license. Taking the lead on the research, I found that such a policy directly contradicted HUD Guidance, and my supervisor was able to use that information to return our client to the waiting list in the position he would have been in had he not been removed in April. Without our assistance, he would have been homeless.

These cases, and the cases I helped with that involved failure of the landlord to make repairs, imparted upon me the effect having a nice, clean home can have on a person's life and ensured that I will not forgot that that is a privilege that not everyone has, for one reason or another. It also brought into sharp focus the good that can come from a state law that protects

tenants or the harm that results when it disadvantages tenants. While the importance of a home cannot be underscored enough, the unemployment compensation cases and garnishment cases I helped on also showed me the very real struggle that people face in making ends meet and the importance of legal aid in helping the poorest members of our communities.

I had absolutely no understanding of garnishments, liens, or bankruptcy going into my summer in Petersburg. Early on, I sat down with my supervisor and a client who had been garnished twice due to an issue with the bank. Essentially, she needed to okay that the money garnished from her account could go to the adverse party's attorney. While she understood the garnishment, and was not fighting it, she was unaware of the issue but was looking at a lot less money in her bank account than was correct. Thanks to the intervention of my supervisor, the issue was sorted, and the client was able to pay bills she could not have otherwise paid.

Another garnishment case, for which I only assisted on the paperwork, involved a bad deal by the client when he was younger on a car. He was unable to make the payments, and now the dealer was coming after him for the money, resulting such a large loss of wages that our client had gotten a second job and was working nearly 60 hours a week to make ends meet. In this case, my supervisor consulted with another CVLAS attorney, and it was decided that the client should file for bankruptcy. Thanks to the quick filing, and a successful argument to dismiss the garnishment that I assisted with, our client has a second chance in life without the ghost of a stupid decision from his youth haunting him.

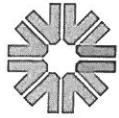
In my second unemployment compensation case of the summer, I took the lead on the case of a man fired for a seemingly voluntarily quitting, though the facts were not, and are not, fully clear to me. I successfully argued that he was terminated, and as such should receive unemployment benefits. After leaving the VEC building in downtown Richmond, our client kept thanking me and shaking my hand. He even told me I have a bright future. I laughed a little at his enthusiasm, but I was also ecstatic in the knowledge that I helped ensure that he would not need to worry about money as he looked at an uncertain future.

Helping with garnishment cases and unemployment compensation cases was a bid deal to me. While my family was never dirt poor, I saw my parents struggle to make sure we always had what we needed. Knowing that I helped these clients, in even this small way, to be able to provide for themselves and their families is an indescribable feeling.

This summer gave me new perspectives on basic life needs that I will take into my post-law school public service career, wherever that may be, which I think are impactful and which I will endeavor to always consider when determining the purpose of the law. Most importantly though, it reminded me why I wanted to be a lawyer—because the law is there to serve everyone, not just those who can afford it.

Sincerely,

Norma Volkmer  
William & Mary Marshall-Wythe School of Law  
J. D. expected May 2018



# CENTRAL VIRGINIA LEGAL AID SOCIETY

229 NORTH SYCAMORE STREET, PETERSBURG, VA 23803

CHRISTOPHER BERNHARDT  
STAFF ATTORNEY  
PHONE: 804-518-2128  
FAX: 804-861-4311  
E-MAIL: CHRISB@CVLAS.ORG

August 4, 2017

VIA E-MAIL (dan@equaljusticeamerica.org)

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

## **RE: Norma Volkmer - Summer 2017 Fellow**

Dear Dan:

On behalf of Central Virginia Legal Aid Society (CVLAS), I want to thank Equal Justice America for funding William & Mary law student Norma Volkmer to work at our Petersburg office over the course of the summer. Norma worked with me in the Petersburg office from May 22, 2017 through August 2, 2017 to fulfill her ten-week commitment.

Norma was a hard worker who immediately contributed to our office. With Norma's assistance, I was able to provide more and better free civil legal services to our community's most vulnerable populations.

During her time at CVLAS, Norma assisted me with numerous housing law, family law, domestic violence, unemployment compensation, and consumer law cases. With her help, we obtained protective orders, child support and custody orders, and unemployment benefits and we stopped families from being evicted.

Under my supervision, Norma researched legal questions, drafted correspondence and court documents, interviewed clients, accompanied me to court proceedings, and represented clients using her third-year practice certificate. Norma showed great passion for my housing law and unemployment compensation clients and did a great job making sure I was prepared to provide them with the best possible representation.

The fellowship also benefited Norma as she gained significant practical legal experience and saw the great need for free legal services that exists in the Tri-cities and the surrounding counties.

One of Norma's cases that stuck out for me was her work with a Petersburg man seeking help when his former employer tried to prevent him from receiving unemployment compensation benefits after firing him. In addition to collecting all the essential facts in the case, Norma represented the client at the Appeals Examiner's hearing (the administrative agency equivalent of a civil trial). Due to Norma's research, zealous representation, and oral argument, the Appeals Examiner affirmed the client's qualification for unemployment compensation benefits. The client was extremely grateful for Norma's assistance and told me that she had a "bright future."

With Norma's help in a landlord-tenant dispute, CVLAS obtained a judgment for \$3,500.00 against a disreputable Petersburg landlord. This client, the tenant, had moved to Petersburg after retirement and put down a \$3,500 deposit on a house in disrepair as part of a lease-to-own contract. The landlord then refused to make any of the repairs the client requested. Instead of fixing things, the landlord promised the client that he would return the \$3,500 deposit if the client moved out. Yet, when the client did so, the landlord claimed the \$3,500 was non-refundable. Norma researched the property and contract defenses and counter-arguments so I could be prepared for trial. Norma prepared all of my trial materials and prepared the client to testify. The client obtained a favorable judgment due in part to Norma's extensive research and behind-the-scenes work.

Additionally, Norma's research proved essential in helping a 55-year-old disabled and homeless Petersburg man whose housing application had been rejected by a federally-subsidized apartment complex due to a seventeen-year-old misdemeanor conviction. This struck the client and us as unfair as the local courts destroyed any record of this conviction after ten years and the client had no other criminal record.

Norma drafted a letter to the apartment manager stating the facts and applicable law, and requesting that the client be placed back on the waiting list in the position he would have been in had he not been rejected. Norma explained why the apartment complex's tenant selection policy violated Department of Housing and Urban Development guidelines and rules. As a result, the client submitted a new application that was approved and he was placed on the waiting list in the position he would have been in without the unlawful rejection. This client will likely soon move into this apartment complex where he will be able to afford housing with his modest income.

The funding provided by Equal Justice America allowed Norma to make the commute from Williamsburg to Petersburg every day without the worry of the added financial costs. As I have mentioned, it is difficult to attract law students to work in Petersburg due to the greater number of opportunities available in Richmond and other cities that do not involve lengthy commutes.

I have attached a photograph of Norma and me meeting with a client.

We are delighted that Equal Justice America will be funding Norma to continue her work with Central Virginia Legal Aid Society this fall.

If you have any questions or concerns, please call me at (804) 518-2128 or send me an e-mail at [chrisb@cvlas.org](mailto:chrisb@cvlas.org). Thank you.

Sincerely,



Christopher P. Bernhardt  
Staff Attorney

Enclosure