

Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 201,
13540 East Boundary Road,
Midlothian, VA 23112

RE: EJA Fellowship Final Letter

To Dan Ruben:

Over this previous summer, of 2022, I had the distinct pleasure of interning with the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau within the Family Law Practice group. The internship gave me direct hands-on experience working with directly with clients, drafting letters and memorandum, filing documents with the court, communicating with opposing counsel/parties, and witnessing trials. Beyond the technical experience offered I spent my summer representing indigent clients in the greater Boston area reaffirming my desire to assist those with the least access to the legal system achieve justice and the best possible outcomes given their circumstances.

The work over the course of the summer gave me substantial insight into the reality of family law with a dash of immigration. The reality of the intensity with which family law matters are handled did not shock me per se, but the reality of an inability to make all parties truly happy was uncomfortable to say the least. This was an important recognition to have, as unlike with other forms of law where there may often be a clear “winner” and “loser,” when handling matters of custody, divorce, and other intimate circumstances often all the parties involved are left deeply unsatisfied. This coupled with the inherent racist and sexist nature of the family court system was a shock to the system just as much as it was a learning experience. With this in mind, a large portion of my summer focused on achieving critical goals and outcomes, ensuring safety of clients and children, and access, before seeking less critical aims. None of this is a comment on the importance of matters in the eyes of clients however and the value of this, but rather, the recognition of limits and thus the need to establish a hierarchy of importance to approach cases from. Which often meant that ensuring a child’s safety and privacy came before negotiating vacation time.

Even more shocking was coming face-to-face with the injustice of the family court system. Judges demonstrating clear bias and mistakenly considered financial/employment status in whether a mother could see her child. Another taking the side of a father who was demonstrated to be abusive, due a desire to punish a genuine mistake on part of the mother and with subtle tones of racism bleeding into analysis. A father who due to procedural requirements had no clear avenue to see his son ripped from him a year prior. And another case in which the opposing council demonstrated such malice as to call the property manager of a mother to attempt to have her evicted. When faced with a system, judges, and even fellow attorneys who demonstrate clear bias and a destructive desire, the pains of the family increase in magnitude such that beyond the actual circumstances faced the parents and children must also come to face an unfair and unsympathetic system.

Moving away from the reality of the practice in general and the interactions I had with the wider family court system, the clients, and cases themselves, were deeply fulfilling. Despite the occasional sadness there were highlights as well.

I had the opportunity to create positive outcomes for people's lives in a tangible sense that balanced the harder aspects of the work. Working with a mother and daughter to achieve special immigrant juvenile status after a series of hard circumstances and living conditions that forced migration was by far one of my favorite highlights. The paperwork and documents were tedious and lengthy, and the memorandum of law in support of special findings took me days, but the short and simple act of sitting with them explaining the process and hearing them open for affidavits made it all worth it and then some. The special immigrant cases in general are what has kept me interested in immigration law with a desire to work with those that have nowhere else and need help.

A case that was far heavier but similarly inspirational regarded the custody of a child. Which was simple enough in theory, and technically the case was about to be closed given a final judgment received on modification. However, behavior on part of the dad concerned me in such a degree that I pushed to keep the case open, included out resident social worker and worked with the opposing council and party to ensure that the behavior would cease. Long discussions with all the parties involved, including the child's therapist never felt like work; once I knew how the father was behaving towards the child it felt essential that the child's comfort, safety, and wellbeing be ensured. Given the previous suicide attempts, and child's own complaints and feelings I knew the case couldn't be closed until the child was in a place of relative safety and comfort and the therapist's suggestions were being adhered to per the court order. Notable about this case was that it remained so pervasive for me outside of work as well. For several nights I went to sleep thinking about and concerned about the child, 9-to-5 hours were inadequate to offer the support the family needed, and thus I never once worried about it. This was my first insight into exactly why attorneys are often working such demanding schedules, as I was able to imagine what it might be like having dozens of clients with similarly concerning circumstances that I wish to help ceaselessly.

Throughout the summer many of the cases left similar marks on me and left me with tangible lessons and insights far beyond the simple technically knowledge gained over the summer. Understanding how to make arguments that subtly address concerns of racial bias, finding obscure and current/prospective laws to bolster arguments for topics such as the separation of a parents' financial circumstance and access to their children, and handling rude, incompetent, and aggressive opposing counsel all allowed me to genuinely understand the career I had chosen and reaffirm the desire to work with indigent clients who most need legal assistance. To this end the EJA Summer Fellowship was indispensable in affording me this opportunity. I don't come from money; far from it, it has been completely dependent on previously earned savings and scholarships/fellowships to ensure I can pursue the law that I wish to pursue. Without the EJA Fellowship this summer would not have been financially feasible and would have all but thrust me into further and private loans to fund my work. This is a sad reality for many low income, first generation, minority students of color who are deeply connected with the topics of public interest law but are often prevented from seeking the career paths early on due to financial limitations and dependents. So personally, speaking I am deeply thankful for the help of EJA donors and the fellowship in providing me the freedom to seek my goals.

Best Regards,



Damani Taye Fields
Washington University School of Law Class of 2024