



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1:

I have been working with CHIRLA for a month now and just a few days ago I felt my first sense of accomplishment where I was able to apply everything I have learned so far. Working in the Removal Defense Unit means I am familiarizing myself with immigration court proceedings and the limited opportunities for individuals fleeing their home countries. The work is not easy because these are emotional discussions for the client but it is that much more meaningful to give the client an opportunity to be heard. It can be discouraging to have to explain to the client that the law is not as inviting as our organization but this is why I find it so meaningful to establish a sense of trust with the client. Our goal is to give the client a sense of security that the organization is advocating in their best interest when the entire process is extremely intimidating. I am sharing a mural that CHIRLA has in the conference room where we met with the client. It depicts the role that the organization has played in giving hope to this important population in our country who often times can feel hopeless.

Update 2:

I attended my first hearing, albeit virtually, in this room. Working with the attorney and client through the process leading up to this day was profound. As I mentioned before, I have established a trusting relationship with the client and this has continued to reflect in our work together. This has been meaningful, not only for me but for her to be able to share her story with confidence. Going before an immigration judge can be daunting especially because the judge and government attorney target the respondent's credibility. We made this known to the client and at first she was hesitant to trust her own memory, especially because it is difficult to have to relive her experiences. Nevertheless, she persevered in recalling her experience by even reviewing her declaration on her own and coming to us with questions and concerns. She played a significant role in the process which is what our organization aims to do. Our clients are understandably intimidated by being in removal proceedings, but our work focuses on putting the fate of their life back in their hands. The judge granted a continuance so my next steps will be to work on a more detailed declaration with the client which I



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aim to finalize before my externship ends to ensure the client that her materials will be prepared by someone she trusts.

Update 3:

Realizing I only have a few weeks left of my externship, I recently reflected on how significant my role has been. I have experience in corporate immigration, but the meaning behind my pro bono work now stands out to me even more. While I managed almost one hundred cases at once in corporate immigration, here at CHIRLA I have only interacted with a few clients. However, this work is more impactful for me because I am getting to know the client's full story. Asylum is a difficult threshold to satisfy which means we must ask clients for excruciating detail about what they have suffered in order to make a strong claim for them. It is difficult for the clients to have to recount these experiences, but our motive is to, as one client put it, do what we can so what they suffered was not in vain. This is admittedly a burdensome responsibility for the organization but telling the clients' stories to show that they should not be sent back to such harsh conditions is invaluable. These are not just narratives written into an affidavit but personal experiences that I can say I have had a role in advocating for a positive outcome to result from it all.

Update 4:

I was recently reflecting with my coworkers on how little I felt like I was able to accomplish in such a short time. However, once I completed my report to my attorney on the work that I had completed and matters still pending, I realized that the list was much more extensive. Perhaps it was the fact that this work did not feel laborious. I enjoyed going into the office, surrounded by a great staff, always with the opportunity to learn. CHIRLA has been a great work environment because we are all working towards the same mission of empowering our clients. This was reflected in the case I had the most involvement in. My last task in the office was meeting with her to review the declaration I developed across the ten weeks. It was the most difficult task to ask her to revisit difficult memories, but I was grateful that she felt comfortable enough to take breaks with me and just chat. Her expression of gratitude at the end of the session is one that I will not forget and will carry with me as I continue to pursue the goal I shared with this organization to use the law to strengthen our community.

Update 5:

As I transition back to school from my summer position, I realize how much I have grown and how much more motivated I am to persist in my venture of revolving my practice around community. I was very appreciative of the opportunity to be an EJA Fellow, not only to have the financial support in a public interest non-profit position, but to be reminded to reflect on the progress that I have made through my frequent reflections. Being able to look back at these journal entries reminded me of the nerve-wracking experience I had in the beginning in comparison to the confidence I held in the position by the end.

Up until this point of the externship, I did not have the confidence in taking on an interview by myself. I knew this required a level of training in trauma-informed interviewing strategies and I wanted to have a considerate



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conversation with the client. I was given the opportunity to listen in on the attorney's preparation meeting with the client for an individual hearing. This opened my eyes to the important role an immigration attorney plays at such a pivotal point in the client's journey to this country. Not only are the clients faced with the possibility of a deportation order, but for the claims we were making including asylum and cancellation of removal, we are asking these individuals to share very personal details in an effort to support their claim to remain in this country. I witnessed the attorney take these goals and implement them into the conversations with the client. As time progressed, I was able to participate in more client meetings after this one and even participated in the conversations more contributing both to making sure the client felt heard and bringing to the attorney's attention issues I had questions on.

As significant as these learning opportunities were for me, I also learned about my ability to take on this position. I am incredibly passionate about public interest work because my main goal is to support the community I come from in some way. I was born and raised in Los Angeles so any cause I take on here will be close to home, figuratively and literally. For this reason, I appreciated being able to have an accessible strategy in managing the potential compassion fatigue that comes with being exposed to these heartbreaking stories. I was not sure whether I was even ready to have these kinds of conversations with clients. Thankfully, the attorneys helped me ease into the environment of having these conversations.

The lessons I learned through this externship experience will inform how I carry myself in future positions with significant confidence that I am capable of serving the position well.