

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

August 27, 2013

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My summer working at Central Virginia Legal Aid Society was an invaluable experience that has solidified my commitment to public interest law. From day one at my clerkship I was heavily involved with direct client communication. This included anything from calling clients to discuss their legal claim to conducting interviews with potential witnesses for an upcoming trial our office was handling. In addition to direct client contact, I drafted letters, complaints, and memoranda, observed our attorneys in the courtroom, and was exposed to new areas of the law. These experiences not only allowed me to refine skills taught in the classroom but they also allowed me to develop new skills such as learning what questions to ask when determining the viability of a legal complaint. The fellowship awarded to me by Equal Justice America made this summer clerkship opportunity possible.

One of the most influential experiences I had this summer was preparing for a child custody trial. Our client was a young mother who came to our office in a panic one late Friday afternoon because the father of their child was suing for sole custody. After attending the first hearing with the young woman the following Monday, our supervising attorney gave me the broad task of starting to formulate our case. This assignment included: researching the child custody factors that judges utilize to determine which parent should have custody, communicating with our client about the particulars of the familial history, contacting relevant parties and interviewing them about their knowledge of the situation, formulating questions for interrogatories, and determining which pieces of information were most valuable to winning custody.

On the most basic level, this particular experience taught me what was involved in preparing for a trial. Being able to be part of the preparation from the initial client meeting until days before the trial occurred allowed me to see every facet of the preparation. From real-world legal research, to frank conversations with a client, to communicating with the adverse party, to preparing discovery, this case showed me that even a common legal issue can have a myriad of pieces that all need to be in place in order for the intended outcome to result. Without seeing this process in full, it is hard to understand and appreciate all of the “non-academic” skills necessary to helping clients.

In addition, working on this child custody case enabled me to understand why family law can be such a draining, yet, rewarding area of law. The types of legal issues confronted in family law cases are among the most important. While it was difficult to see some of our clients being cheated by used car salesmen, those cases were not nearly as impactful as child custody or protective order cases.

Finally, working with this young mother provided me with the opportunity to deeply connect with a client and understand the unique challenges many legal aid clients face. At the beginning of trial preparation, our client had a hard time trusting our office. She acted under the assumption that we were going to give up on her, as she described so many already had.

Because our supervising attorney had interns available to her this summer, she was able to assign me to keep in contact with our client. Therefore, I made sure we were in constant communication, whether to clarify a question I had or to update her on the case's progress. Even with constant contact and the increasing amount of personal information she was willing to give to me, our client still doubted herself so much that she often conveyed that our office probably had more important things to do than to help her. While not all the clients that I interacted with this summer had an air of hopelessness, several of them, similar to this young mother, did. Many of our clients rarely had people in their corner fighting for them and they were very grateful for the help that our office was able to provide.

My experience at Central Virginia Legal Aid Society helped me understand the importance of legal aid's place in the legal community. Without legal aid a mother would have lost custody of her child because the father did not want to pay child support, tenants would have been wrongfully evicted leaving them homeless, people unable to navigate the judicial system on their own would not be able to get divorced, and the list goes. Legal aid is more often than not the last line of defense before clients give up. This summer clerkship has not only alerted me to the absolute necessity of legal aid but has left me certain of my commitment to become a legal aid lawyer. I am sincerely grateful for Equal Justice America for making this unforgettable experience possible.

Sincerely,

Noelle Quam
Washington and Lee School of Law
J.D. Candidate, 2015

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August 29, 2013

Dan Ruben
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Equal Justice America
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Dear Mr. Ruben:

Noelle Quam was one of three law students clerking at our Charlottesville office this summer. Each summer clerk was randomly assigned cases as they came in this summer, providing each clerk with a wide variety of tasks and topics. Noelle not only gained experience in a variety of legal tasks such as drafting letters and legal research, but she also had the opportunity to explore all three areas of law our office specializes in: housing law, family law, and consumer law.

One of the most common tasks required of Noelle when she received a new case was directly contacting the client. During these phone calls Noelle was responsible for listening to the legal complaint made by the client, asking questions that were pertinent to understanding the legal issue, and reporting to me. After she made contact, Noelle and I would discuss the viability of each legal claim and determine a course of action. For example, in housing cases this often required Noelle to obtain a copy of the lease, read the terms of the lease, consult statutes or case law, and decide whether or not the landlord and/or tenant acted properly. After reviewing her determination with me, Noelle contacted the parties via phone calls and mailed letters on my behalf.

In addition to short-term projects, Noelle was also tasked with helping me prepare for a child custody case that came to our office this summer. Noelle kept in constant communication with our client. She also researched the familial history, interviewed potential witnesses, researched how child custody is determined, and drafted interrogatories. This case spanned almost the entire duration of Noelle's clerkship, giving her the opportunity to experience trial preparation.

Finally, toward the end of the summer our office began to take divorce cases. Noelle and the other clerks were tasked with interviewing the clients. From these interviews, Noelle drafted complaints, filled out necessary court documents, and continued to contact clients for any



missing paperwork or information required to begin the divorce proceedings. In one instance, Noelle was able to use her Spanish language abilities to complete these tasks for a client who was unable to speak or understand English.

Noelle's legal research and writing skills were excellent, however, I was particularly impressed with her dedication to our clients. On several occasions, Noelle travelled to outlying counties to meet with clients, assist them with paperwork and speak with potential witnesses. She was also the primary point of contact for the client in the custody case referenced above. I believe that this client, who is a victim of domestic violence, came to trust that our office could help her largely due to her contacts with Noelle.

Noelle expressed to me her desire to pursue a career as a legal aid attorney. I believe that she is well suited to this work and would be a great asset to a public interest organization. Noelle's Equal Justice America fellowship gave her the opportunity to start pursuing this career path, and I am glad she chose to do so at CVLAS, as we thoroughly enjoyed working with her.

Very truly yours,

Robin L. Edwards

