

September 20, 2019

Dan Ruben and Katie Toman
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Rd
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben and Ms. Toman,

I am incredibly grateful to have received the Equal Justice America Law Student Fellowship this past summer 2020 as it afforded me the opportunity to intern full-time at Lenox Hill Neighborhood House's Housing Unit and to be part of a community of lawyers that truly cares for the wellbeing of East Harlem residents.

It was my wish to attend law school full-time when I applied. However, given that I come from a humbling financial background, I decided to enroll in the evening program at Fordham University while remaining at my full-time job. This path allows me to complete my Juris Doctor in 4 years. That decision has certainly limited the activities that I am able to partake in law school, as there is simply not enough time to work full-time, attend law school, and also gain practical experience. My job graciously allowed me a leave of absence for the summer but without pay. Receiving financial support from EJA, coupled with a law school grant, certainly allowed me to gain that practical experience I've been yearning, as well as, give back to the community that I am part of.

The Legal Advocacy Department at Lenox Hill assists over 5000 low-income individuals and families in Manhattan each year with diverse civil legal issues such as housing, health care, government benefits and advance directives. They operate through a multidisciplinary holistic approach to legal representation, such that their clients receive assistance not only with their civil legal needs, but also have access to social workers, care managers, ESOL classes and more within the organization.

At Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, I worked primarily in our Housing Unit and my work truly mattered. Every Friday, I was part of a legal team of about 6 people that provided legal representation for a day to tenants facing eviction for non-payment in housing court. On Fridays, I was assigned to 1-3 clients to do intakes, request HPD inspections, negotiate deals on the clients' behalf and appear in front of the judge. On other days, I worked on tasks set by my direct supervisor. These included: conducting intakes, writing amended answers, writing motions, conducting home visits, negotiating with opposing counsel, and writing research memos that would allow us to assess the rights of our tenants. Some of our clients lived in apartments where the bathroom was non-existent – no sinks, no walls, clogged bathtub, rat and roach infestations – putting in danger the livelihood of all that live in the apartments. Other clients, had been without gas for over a year – forcing them to buy over-priced cooked food outside of the home, which in turn would take away their ability to pay rent. For many of these clients, we were able to secure repairs, and negotiate abatements to keep the tenants in their home. In some instances, clients were not able to afford any payments so we assisted them with fundraising funds by going to different charities and HRA.

Without a doubt, my experience at Lenox Hill has been the highlight of my law school career. First, this was the first time in five years that I have been able to take off work and focus solely on my passion – to provide legal services for low-income individuals and minorities. Second, I gained experience in a new field of law that I had yet not been exposed to. Third, the work simply mattered and kept those with humble means with a roof on their hands. And fourth, I was part of a community of lawyers that cares about their work and that showed a deep interest in my development as a soon-to-be lawyer.

Thank you again for your financial assistance this summer and for giving me the opportunity to help our clients in need. I sincerely appreciate EJA's support and feel lucky to have been a part of the fellows who work with underprivileged and disadvantaged individuals.

Sincerely,

Vianka Abreu