



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: Kids in Need of Defense

Update 1: I am so grateful to receive funding through Equal Justice America to support my legal internship with Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) Northern Virginia this summer. As an EJA Fellow, I'll be helping to provide immigration legal services to unaccompanied children.

Equal Justice America is a non-profit that funds law students and recent graduates to provide pro bono legal services for low-income and underserved clients.

Update 2:

I am so grateful to receive funding through Equal Justice America to support my legal work with Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), Northern Virginia this summer.

If you ever visit the KIND office, you'll notice a children's play area filled with stuffed animals, fidgets, crayons, and other fun toys. This week I had the opportunity to observe an intake with two young siblings who thoroughly enjoyed their unicorn coloring sheets and fairy toys.

I've learned that providing play spaces and creative outlets is not only lots of fun, but also an important part of trauma-informed interviewing practices. KIND works with many children that have been abandoned, abused, or neglected, so it can be hard for the kids to trust adults.

Making sure that the office is comfortable and fun helps build trust so that the children can share sensitive information, which is oftentimes crucial to their legal cases. Creative play also provides an outlet for the children to destress before, during, and after talking about traumatic experiences.

Next week I'll be conducting my first intake, and I hope to put into practice the trauma-informed interviewing skills that I've seen thus far at KIND.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Update 3:

There is no right to counsel in immigration court. For individuals that are in removal (deportation) proceedings, they must find a non-profit attorney to take their case, hire a private attorney, or represent themselves. ~50% of unaccompanied children in the United States will appear in front of an immigration judge without an attorney. These children must represent themselves and navigate the complex and emotional proceedings alone.

Quality counsel is so important because immigration judges are 100X more likely to grant relief to unaccompanied children with legal representation than to those without it. Many children are eligible for relief, but are not able to navigate the system alone.

I've seen this phenomena play out in firsthand in Northern Virginia, where the demand for immigration attorneys far exceeds the supply. In conducting phone screenings with individuals that call our office, I've had so many conversations with people who say "I've called every non-profit and private attorney in this area, and no one has the capacity to take my case."

These experiences have strengthened my resolve to enter the immigration law field and play a part in increasing access to counsel. I've learned that one aspect of being an attorney is fighting hard for your clients in court, and hopefully winning their cases. Even beyond the outcome, I firmly believe that no person – especially children – should be forced to navigate court alone. That's part of the reason why we have public defenders in the criminal context, and it's sorely needed in immigration court too.

Update 4:

This morning, I shadowed an individual asylum hearing in immigration court. A law firm represented the client pro bono (for free) with Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) providing legal training and mentorship. The firm sent four attorneys, including a partner, to the hearing. KIND brought two attorneys and one legal intern (myself) to the hearing.

Overall, there were six attorneys in the room to support the client. The sheer number of attorneys sent a powerful message: you are not alone, and we're here to fight for you. Still, my heart broke a little bit because so many immigrants face court without even one attorney.

The attorneys were united with one goal: winning asylum for the client. They filed over 1,000 pages in support of her application and prepared two expert witnesses to testify about country conditions in El Salvador. The attorneys spent many long hours practicing with the client to prepare her for testimony and cross-examination.

Her testimony, which took about two hours, was extremely powerful and credible. After her testimony and a



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

brief cross-examination, the Department of Homeland Security stated that they did not oppose her application for asylum. The judge ultimately ruled in her favor, granting her asylum.

I am so happy for the client and grateful to the attorneys for the opportunity to shadow. Soon it will be my turn, as I'll be representing an asylum-seeker this spring through Georgetown's asylum clinic.

Update 5:

Can you imagine sharing the most traumatic experience of your life with a room full of strangers, and then being accused of lying or exaggerating?

Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) works with unaccompanied children that live with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other serious mental health conditions. It makes sense that so many unaccompanied children struggle with mental health, because they are processing the trauma that caused them to flee their home countries and seek asylum in the United States.

While children often find physical safety in the United States, children are emotionally unsafe when forced to relive their deepest traumas in an adversarial court setting that is geared towards adults. At an asylum hearing, children must testify in excruciating detail about the most difficult incidents of their life. In cross-examination, the ICE prosecutors often attempt to expose inconsistencies in the client's testimony to impugn their credibility. Trauma has deep impacts on memory, which means that even the most deeply true testimony can have a scattered timeline, gaps, or inconsistencies.

The courtroom experience is re-traumatizing for both adults and children, and it is incredibly difficult for many clients to testify and tell their stories.

Children should not be forced through such a traumatic system, but KIND helps our clients to navigate the present moment while advocating for change in the future. KIND's social services coordinators help connect children with mental health professionals, which is often essential for them to emotionally prepare to testify. The legal team could not do our work without the social services coordinators, and we are especially grateful for their work during National Minority Mental Health Awareness Month this July.

Update 6:

This summer, I received funding through Equal Justice America to support my legal internship with Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) Northern VA. Equal Justice America is a non-profit that funds law students and recent graduates to provide pro bono legal services for low-income and underserved clients.

For any rising 1Ls or law students, I'd strongly recommend applying for EJA funding if you are planning on entering the public sector. If you are interested, my inbox is always open and I'm happy to edit your application or share more about my experience.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

The main requirement for EJA Fellows is to post five updates on social media throughout the course of the summer. For me, the updates have been a helpful way to reflect on my experiences and share information I'm passionate about with my network.

My summer internship at KIND was a formative experience that further solidified my desire to work as an immigration attorney at a non-profit after graduation. I met so many wonderful mentors that showed me the path I can walk to enter into the public sector. I cannot recommend the KIND Northern VA office highly enough. Please don't hesitate to DM me if you're a student interested in an internship/externship and I'd be happy to connect you.

Throughout the summer, I had an opportunity to dive into all areas of case work including client intakes, application preparation, trial preparation, and legal research/writing. I had the pleasure of working on cases for a diverse group of clients from Turkey, Afghanistan, Guatemala, and El Salvador, amongst other countries. I learned a lot about trauma-informed interviewing skills within the context of working with children. These skills are also applicable to adults, and I look forward to applying this knowledge in future work.

After a tough 1L full of doctrinal courses on contracts and the like, it was rejuvenating to work at KIND and remember why I entered law school in the first place. Working directly with clients brings me great joy because I love getting to know people and building relationships. This knowledge has also shaped the choices I'm making going forward in law school, including participating in a habeas corpus practicum this fall and the asylum clinic this spring.