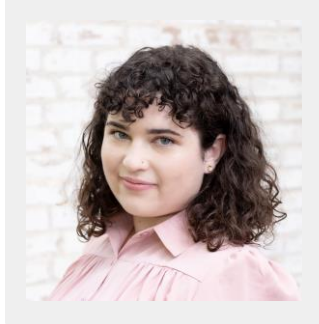




EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



Name: Samantha Shaps

Law School: SMU Law School

Organization: Texas RioGrande Legal Aid

Update 1: I am grateful for Equal Justice America’s generosity in funding my clerkship with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid. My clerkship started a little over a month ago, and I have already had so many opportunities to work one-on-one with clients and prepare documents for trial. This work is important, and I see how it changes people’s lives every single day.

Legal aid organizations like TRLA make justice accessible to all individuals—regardless of systemic barriers that tend to limit access to legal services. It is rewarding to contribute to such meaningful collaborations, where one update phone call with a client can change their entire outlook on the case.

Since joining TRLA, I have participated in legal matters relating to housing, real property, domestic violence, child advocacy, family law, and education law. It is rare to experience such variety in one organization, and I am humbled to be part of such an impactful firm. Every day, I wake up with a smile on my face and a passion in my heart for the bigger movements and individual stories that carry me through my externship.

I am excited to see what else I experience during this fellowship, and I look forward to exploring more avenues of the law with my wonderful teams at TRLA.

Update 2: During Pride Month at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (“TRLA”), I learned so much about the work TRLA does for the LGBTQ+ community. In addition to assisting low-income Texans in 68 counties with legal issues in 45 different practice areas, TRLA helps individuals obtain identity affirmation by way of name and gender marker changes.

At the San Antonio Pride Festival, I shared information and resources about TRLA with hundreds of local residents. Celebrating Pride Month while also helping with TRLA’s booth felt so special. As folks from all



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corners of San Antonio gathered together to experience collective unity, our booth provided information about our legal services as well as Texas-shaped stickers in dozens of LGBTQ+ identity flags. People grew excited when they could find their flag, which felt like our way of saying “we see you and we are here for you.”

As I continue to learn and develop under TRLA’s guidance, I am reminded that outreach is just as important as the legal aid itself. The individuals who need legal aid most often do not have the resources to find TRLA in the first place. This makes the outreach portion of legal aid that much more important.

Thank you, Equal Justice America, for making this opportunity possible!

Update 3: As I learn more about public interest law and its need for resources, I also become more appreciative of Equal Justice America’s (“EJA”) efforts to sustain and propel important work. Without EJA’s funding, my summer of learning and experiencing would not be possible.

Under EJA funding at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (“TRLA”), I have had the privilege of addressing legal matters in a variety of sectors. Other than housing and family law, I have also observed issues related to real property, education, Title IX, tax, and juvenile justice.

I am grateful for TRLA’s continued devotion to its clerks, who are fortunate enough to grow under the care and guidance of such zealous advocates.

This experience would not have been imaginable without EJA’s generosity. I hope to pay it forward to the fellows to come, who undoubtedly will contribute to the larger effort of equal justice. If you are able, please consider donating to EJA for law students who intend to pursue public interest law.

Update 4: As my summer with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid as an Equal Justice America fellow comes to its finale, I look back on all the amazing memories I made alongside such brilliant advocates. I started off my summer in a place I consider home, San Antonio, Texas, where I was able to address local issues impacting communities that live right around the block.

I found my calling in litigation, which continues to remind me why I wanted to become a lawyer. I am the person I am today because of where I come from. Growing up in a small town right outside of San Antonio allowed me to understand the difficulties suffered in both city and rural environments. This nuanced understanding of humanity has allowed me to tap into interpersonal skills I never knew I had.

It was an honor to serve the city that served me by providing legal aid to low-income individuals from my hometown. I am grateful for the opportunity to develop essential skills under the guidance and strength of attorneys I now think of as my mentors.



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Update 5: The first thing I remember hearing when I woke up for school in the morning was the sound of the cows mooing and the horses neighing. The floorboards creaked in the house my aunt built as I got ready for school and checked on each animal. We had horses, cows, chickens, ducks, goats, and (at one point) a donkey. Sometimes, classmates and teachers could still smell the barn from my boots and see the hay on my clothes. I didn't mind. In this small town of Bandera, Texas, the "Cowboy Capital of the World," we all needed to dust off our clothes before first period.

While I only moved to Bandera when I was thirteen years old, my grandparents have lived there for decades. People often ask what brought a family of born and raised New Yorkers to a small town in Texas, and I always tell them that the love and loyalty found in rural communities can be the stuff of movies. The stillness allows us to think clearly outside of the hustle and bustle. However, this solitude comes with the unfortunate consequence of missing out on the resources of bigger cities.

Although people in Bandera know everything about the town news and inhabitants, many folks do not have access to the outside world. This is not because folks from rural areas don't seek resources, but because big cities often neglect what is out of sight and out of mind. Unfortunately, people then end up missing out on information that can benefit their livelihood or pursuit of justice. The general lack of attention to rural Texas often leaves those communities as an afterthought. Knowing this, I sought a law clerk position with TRLA to help the organization understand small-town needs.

This summer, I had the privilege to serve the community that raised me. In this role, I filled the gaps (those long desolate roads) between rural areas and big cities. I initially joined the firm as a housing and family law clerk. However, TRLA's abundance of legal specializations provided me with the opportunity to try different practice areas. As a result, I worked on projects related to Title IX, LGBTQ+, education, tax, and real property law. My nuanced perspective as a small-town resident turned city-dweller allowed me to identify important considerations for working in rural communities.

One highlight of my summer was finding LGBTQ+ identifying people in small towns and providing them with gender-affirming legal assistance. Seeing faces light up as I shared information on how to change their legal names and gender markers reaffirmed why TRLA's work is so important. Without messengers like TRLA staff, the individuals most in need miss out on life-changing resources.