

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 201
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Dan Ruben,

I am writing this letter with deep gratitude for my Equal Justice America summer fellowship funding. Equal Justice America provided critical funding for my public interest legal internship this past summer. As a non-traditional law student who gave birth to two children during law school and who continues to parent my one-year-old and three-year-old while attending law school full time, having the funding to cover childcare costs while I worked during the summer was vital and non-negotiable. Without that funding, the work that I did would not have been possible. Many non-traditional and minority students in law school end up feeling pressured to work in private sector internships and jobs that do not truly align with their passion for social justice work and advocacy. Equal Justice America ensures that students like me are able to do the social justice work and advocacy that our clients and the country needs.

I worked this past summer at the University of Michigan Human Trafficking Clinic as well as the Human Trafficking Lab. The University of Michigan's Clinic and Lab are unique in that they pair direct services work, as legal representatives of trafficking survivors, with transformative policy work through the Lab. I had the rich opportunity to do work through both the Clinic and the Lab. My work in the Clinic was so well received by our Director, Bridgette Carr, that she invited me to continue the work during the academic semester, which I am currently doing, as an Advanced Clinical Student Attorney. I accepted this opportunity without hesitation, thankful for the opportunity to continue advocating on behalf of the clients that I had become so invested in over the course of the summer.

I worked on several clients' cases over the summer, but there are two that I worked on the most extensively and substantively. The first is a labor trafficking case and the second is a sex and labor trafficking case.

My first client is a 22-year-old young man from Eastern Europe who is a survivor of labor trafficking. I will refer to him by the fictional name of John to protect his confidentiality. John was first trafficked when he was 12-years-old. John was held in involuntary servitude by his family members in the U.S. for six years, until his ultimate escape. He was later re-trafficked by those same family members and escaped again. John's father sent him and his brother to the United States to visit extended family here. The boys returned to Eastern Europe at the end of the summer. But after their mother died, their father sent them back to the United States, under the pretext of a short visit. Instead, John's extended family allowed John's visa to lapse. They also confiscated John's passport and birth certificate. He was kept in America and forced to work against his will for no pay, given no real choice to return home. He was violently abused, forced to work long hours for no pay, and threatened with death if he disobeyed. I worked on John's behalf to apply for a T-visa, a specific type of immigration relief available to victims and survivors of human trafficking.

Labor trafficking is often underrepresented and under-discussed, but an equally harmful and destructive form of trafficking as sex trafficking. It can occur in seemingly mundane environments – from local restaurants to nail salons, gas stations, hotels, farms, and more. Prosecuting these acts and providing relief to the victims is an essential part of the ongoing fight against trafficking, which not only steals from victims their lives, wellbeing, and rightfully earned wages, but also steals opportunities from legally employed workers to work legal jobs and earn wages.

My second client's name is Alexis Ke'Erica Martin ("Ke"), whose harrowing but inspiring story of trafficking and survival is widely known and has been publicized. I was part of a broader legal team through the clinic, partnering with a pro bono team at Dykema (an external legal firm) working on her case. Alexis Martin was first trafficked when she was 15-years-old. She was kidnapped by a drug gang and sold into stripping to pay off a drug debt that was not her own. She went on to be trafficked by a man, Angelo Kerney, who was running an extensive trafficking ring that was selling young girls and women for sex. Clientele not only paid for sex but also to violently physically abuse these girls, including Ke. She was severely abused and violently treated throughout the time she was under Kerney's control. Kerney threatened that if she ever disobeyed him, he would kidnap her younger sister and traffic her for sex as well. Alexis made several attempts at escape, reaching out to family and friends repeatedly, none of which proved successful. Then one day she came in contact with a former friend. He suggested that he could help her to escape if she would allow him and his associates into the house to rob Kerney of some of the cash he had on hand. He said he would protect her and her younger sister and use the cash to help them get far away from there to start a new life. Some of that cash comprised proceeds from the sex work that Kerney forced Alexis to do, and thus was rightfully hers. She saw the cash as her only chance at escaping and starting new somewhere else. Desperate to escape and seeing this as her last chance, Alexis agreed to let them into the house. In what ensued, two of the men who entered the house were involved in an altercation with her trafficker, Kerney, and Kerney was shot and died. Alexis was arrested and charged with murder and attempted robbery and sentenced to 21 years in adult prison, of which she has already served 7. She was wrongfully charged and sentenced and wrongfully diverted from the juvenile justice system at the tender age of 15. She could have qualified under Ohio's Safe Harbor Law, which offers protections for victims of trafficking who are charged for crimes that occurred related to their trafficking, but her lawyer failed to put forward this argument. Ke was granted a clemency petition from Ohio's governor, but later put back into prison because of the actions of another man in her life. Our legal team is working on her behalf to free her from prison.

I am deeply grateful for the funding that Equal Justice America provided that enabled my work this summer on behalf of my clients. This work not only will have an impact on their lives, but also will have a lasting impact on my life.

With great gratitude,
Hannah Cumming
J.D./M.P.P. Candidate, May 2024
University of Michigan Law School
University of Michigan Ford School of Public Policy