



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

SUMMER 2024

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Shireen Afzal
LAW SCHOOL	Cornell Law School
ORGANIZATION	Cornell Tenant Advocacy Project in Collaboration with Law Western NY

Update 1: Working as a legal intern for the Rochester Tenants Advocacy Summer Internship has been an amazing and insightful experience so far. It has allowed me to gain firsthand experience of how it feels to take charge of a case, conduct interviews, go through case documents, and really analyze the problems facing one's client. My first case concerned a man who was living in terrible conditions, and I had prepared questions for my call with him but didn't expect all the vulnerability and trust that was involved in that conversation. I am so grateful that I was given a chance to help people like him who have literally no other recourse, and no other legal option to seek help when they find themselves in horrid situations. Only a couple weeks into the internship and I have already found a new appreciation for the amount of power, and thus, responsibility attorneys carry and how it can be used to utterly transform people's lives. I am very much looking forward to learning more and challenging myself with more cases, and gaining as much experience as I can through this wonderful opportunity afforded in part by being an Equal Justice America Fellow.

Update 2: As I take on more cases, I feel like I am getting a much better sense of how to interact with clients and also anticipate what problems may come up. I had the opportunity to go to court for the first time representing a client in an eviction case. When I arrived and spoke with the opposing attorney, I found out that the information I was basing my settlement terms on was incomplete and not fully accurate, throwing a wrench in my plans. However, it was a great learning opportunity for me to adapt to challenges I may not have expected; I went back to the client, adjusted what terms he'd be willing to accept and also adjusted our settlement plan accordingly using what defenses I had prepared. Thankfully, although the result wasn't the exact one I had in mind when going to court that day, I still left knowing that we had reached a result that the client was happy with ultimately. I believe that this will be just one of many cases where things will spring up unexpectedly, and it has taught me that to be a lawyer you really have to think on your feet and be ready for whatever may come. It was also great seeing the sheer joy on my client's face after this case was settled; no more stress or worry that he would



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be out in the streets, he finally felt like he had an opening. I am heartened that I was able to use the skills I'm learning from this internship to produce such an impact on his life.

Update 3: During the weeks around July 8, I had an experience with a client that was a bit shocking to me but that I feel nevertheless was a valuable experience to learn and grow from. All the clients I help in the Tenants Advocacy Project are indigent clients who turn to us because we are likely all they can afford. From the cases I have taken on there have been many times where a client is just too busy with life that it's difficult to get a hold of them to even ask a few questions and get a clearer picture of the case. Other times, clients have just not shown up during court. It can get frustrating when that happens because I want to help but without some basic communication and rapport in place it can be hard to help effectively.

With the particular case I mentioned first, I learned that another basic aspect is essential to working effectively as a lawyer to help your client: basic respect from your client. One client had preconceived notions of what he wanted to happen and when I explained to him what his options truly (some of the things he wanted just weren't handled in the court we were in!) were, he grew increasingly enraged and started throwing verbal abuse. This was something I had not experienced before, because even if there are some confusions and disgruntled feelings, most clients are happy to get a clear picture of what their options truly are. In this type of situation, I reached out to my supervisors to see how best to handle it and they reminded me that we can only help people who want to be helped, that this is ultimately a collaborative process that involves respect from both sides. As such, I tried my best to handle it with care and finesse, but also made it clear there were boundaries to be had if we wanted to continue working in the case effectively. Although the client didn't take it well, it taught me how to remain calm in highly emotional and highly intense conversations that I may not have expected to have.

Update 4: Before having this internship and hands on experience, I used to think that lawyering was more about winning or losing cases. However, now that I have dealt with a variety of tenant eviction cases myself, I realize that negotiating and reaching a settlement outside of a trial really does seem to be the majority of how cases go. I have also learned that these negotiations can be very unpredictable. There was one case that I prepared several defenses for, gathered proof of how the landlord hadn't followed things properly and failed to give proper notice to the tenant, held lengthy conversations with the tenant to make sure I had a clear picture of the situation before talking to the opposing counsel.

I went in thinking that they would be difficult to deal with, and yet I had barely opened my mouth to list my client's terms, and they had already agreed. I didn't even have a chance (nor a need) to list the defenses I had prepared. In this case, the deal we were offering to the landlord was appealing enough and they didn't see the point in arguing or hashing things out, and instead agreed right away. This also taught me that sometimes it's not so much about being right or having the right defenses ready, but also about anticipating the opposing side's needs and meeting them in the middle in a way that satisfies both sides of the disputes and solves the issue cleanly and quickly.



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On the other hand, a case that I thought would be fairly straightforward and clearcut, involving only offering a payment plan since the tenant was willing to pay the amount of rent owed quickly, ended up becoming more complicated when the opposing counsel pulled out a record with much more money owed than what the landlord had told the tenant was owed and which the tenant firmly believed was inaccurate. As such, I had to move for adjournment for a trial because no one was willing to budge on the issue as there was a fundamental, material fact in dispute.

Update 5: My tenant advocacy internship with Law Western NY was an experience that changed my view on lawyering and the kind of qualities one needs to be a successful lawyer. Before this internship, all my knowledge on law practice was theoretical and all the cases we read about in class are usually huge, defining cases that have made a splash in some way or the other. However, I realized that much of the majority of cases that exist don't even get to court, let alone reach the kind of groundbreaking result you read about, but that doesn't make them any less important. Most of my cases settled. Even the most difficult case I had which had a very hostile dynamic between landlord and tenant, one where I was sure they wouldn't reconcile, ended similarly.

For that case, we had scheduled a trial adjournment later, but after I wrote the Answer with our defense and sent it to my supervisor to get it filed, we heard from the landlord's counsel last minute that they were withdrawing. The case was no less important for not making it to trial; in fact, I think most of the clients involved in these sorts of cases were happy about that fact. Settling before trial means that the problem and headache plaguing them about their legal situation ends that much faster and with that much less complications. A lot of clients, from what I have seen, just want to resolve their situations in the easiest way possible and put the situation behind them, so it makes it the job of the lawyer to package the details and defense of their situation into a reasonable settlement offer that the landlord will be inclined to accept. Although it doesn't always work, this step is essential.

I've also learned just how important it is to communicate well with clients, which means both being very clear with them and also listening carefully to them, paying attention to detail and asking all the important questions.

One time, I went into court and thought I had a good defense thought up, only to be blindsided by information that the client hadn't disclosed. For that reason and for clear communication, I think it's crucial for an attorney to set the tone from the start and establish the communication between attorney and client as a safe place where they can be honest and open; we are here to help and to do that effectively we need accurate information.

Overall, it was an enlightening experience and interacting with clients and handling cases directly illustrated to me what the daily life of a lawyer really looks like. I am grateful for the opportunity to gain these insights and look forward to implementing the lessons learned in the future.