

September 8, 2024

Dan Ruben, Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
3007 East Boundary Terrace, Suite 201  
Midlothian, VA 23112

Good afternoon,

This summer, I had the opportunity to work at the Center for Family Representation (“CFR”). This organization works to defend parents who have been accused by the Administration of Children’s Services (“ACS”) of neglect and abuse. ACS is part of the family policing system: a term coined by activists and scholars like Dorothy Roberts fighting for families to be supported and not separated. When ACS is planning on separating a family by removing the child from their parent, CFR represents a parent’s interests and advocates for the family to get supports set in place so that they can remain together.

I come into this position as someone who has studied the family policing system as a law student, having analyzed the disparate impacts of family policing on low-income communities as well as Black and Indigenous communities of color. I come into this position as someone who lived and grew up in the area the office served: the Queens community. Across the street from the office in Rufus King Park, where I celebrated many birthdays growing up. A few blocks away is my old high school: High School for Law Enforcement and Public Safety. I come into this position as someone who grew up terrified of ACS separating my family. Growing up low-income, my parents could not afford a babysitter when they would leave for work. My parents left my siblings and I alone at home: to ACS, this is grounds to separate a family. The opportunity to defend parents, like my own, in my community was exactly why I went to law school. I related deeply to my clients’ struggles against many systems of oppression that ultimately led to their involvement with the family policing system.

During my fellowship, I wrote and filed motions for seven parents that my supervisors represented. I argued three of those motions in front of three judges in Queens County Family Court, all of which became judges in family court after representing ACS through their positions as attorneys at the Family Court Legal Services (“FCLS”). FCLS’s only client: ACS. The judges that I argued these motions for had only ever practiced as FCLS for their legal careers before becoming court attorneys and later judges. This is not a unique characteristic of Queens County Family Court. This is one of the many systemic injustices that my clients faced. The judges that had the power to protect my clients families’ had spent their careers separating families just like my client’s own family and for reasons not dissimilar in nature: systemic poverty.

The most impactful part of my fellowship was connecting with clients. Many of my clients shared many identities with me. Through our shared identities, I connected with my clients and offered them culturally appropriate support. I grew up as a Latine in a catholic household. This identity allowed me to offer my clients comfort in a way that showed our shared identity, strengthening our connection, rapport, and trust. I understand the distrust in ACS and other policing systems of the state because my family has been policed by these systems. I can help offer my identity to show my clients to show them that I too share this distrust of ACS and am invested in fighting against family policing.

My fellowship at the Center for Family Representation was not just a professional opportunity but a deeply personal and transformative experience. Through this fellowship, I have found the organization that I wish to work for after law school and shown myself that I am fully capable of doing this work. My background and experiences, from growing up in the Queens community to studying the impacts of family policing, allowed me to bring a unique perspective to my work. Defending parents who, like my own family, faced the threat of separation due to systemic inequities was both a professional challenge and a personal mission. Connecting with clients through our shared identities enabled me to provide culturally responsive support, fostering trust and demonstrating my genuine commitment to their cause. This experience reinforced my dedication to advocating for families and fighting against the injustices inherent in the family policing system, solidifying my resolve to continue working towards a more equitable and supportive system for all families.

Sincerely,

Brianne Ortiz  
NUSL Class of 2024