



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

SUMMER 2024

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Sam Miller
LAW SCHOOL	University of Minnesota Law School
ORGANIZATION	AppalReD Legal Aid

Update 1: I am starting my third week at AppalReD Legal Aid here in Somerset, Kentucky, and I have already learned so much. I have worked on cases involving criminal record expungement, divorce, custody, domestic violence, and evictions. I am getting familiar with jurisdictional rules and the court filing process in Kentucky. The attorneys and support staff at AppalReD have all been very welcoming and excited about the time I will spend here. The years they've spent practicing in Kentucky have already been and will continue to be an invaluable resource to me.

Last Friday, I met with the other summer law clerks and organization directors. After initial introductions and an overview of the work the organization does, an older gentleman joined our meeting. He introduced himself as John Rosenberg, and shared the story of how he came to direct and expand AppalReD after fleeing the Holocaust and working as a lawyer in the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Government. He has devoted more than 50 years to AppalReD in an effort to counteract the systemic barriers people living in poverty face. I left the meeting Friday very proud of the organization I am working for this summer.

Update 2: I made the choice to spend my summer working at AppalReD in the Appalachian region of Kentucky because I was excited about the work being done here every day. Last Friday, June 21 was a perfect example of what I hoped I would get to be part of when I accepted the position. Every month AppalReD holds a legal clinic for veterans in the community. The clinic is held at the local VA, where the veterans feel comfortable, thus easing anxiety that is often prevalent when seeking legal representation. The clinic allows veterans to receive any civil legal services they need.

I attended the clinic for the first time and am counting down the days until I get to go back. Most of the work we did Friday consisted of creating wills, living wills, and power of attorney. The atmosphere was unlike most lawyer-client meetings. The VA staff were welcoming. The veterans were thankful for our services and simply a pleasure to be around. It was so rewarding to be able to provide a service to these veterans after all they've done for the rest of us; it was nothing less than what they deserve. As we were leaving the VA that afternoon, overlooking the valley Somerset, KY sits in, we were already talking about who we'd see again next month and who we might meet for the first time.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Update 3: This past week offered a look-in at the daily work of a lawyer and the experience of their clients that doesn't make the cut for the movies and TV shows. A client of ours has been in the process of getting her legal needs resolved over the course of the past many months. It looked like we were going to be able to make sure she was all taken care of last week. However, after we arrived to the courthouse with our client, we were informed the case before that had been scheduled for a half day was going to need the full day. This meant our client's case would be postponed to a later date. This is no one's fault; sometimes cases go longer than anyone expects. And this is a significant setback for our client. She arrived to the courthouse that day expecting to be able to put this matter behind her. She was visibly nervous when she expected the case to be heard and visibly forlorn when we had the unenviable responsibility of informing her the case was delayed.

I am working this summer with some of the most vulnerable Kentuckians. In more ways than one, the odds have been stacked against our clients. It is a frustrating experience—for me, let alone the client—when the system lets them down. I am learning to advocate within the system, and maybe one day, I'll be able to make some changes.

Update 4: At a legal aid, there's no shortage of cases to work with to gain experience. I have worked on cases ranging from divorce to bankruptcy. My focus for this week's update is a different kind of case—expungement.

I am a strong believer in the idea of expungements. It is a well-documented and widely discussed fact—at least in my circles—that the American legal system is overly punitive. We lay claim to the most incarcerated individuals in the world and our rate of incarceration is dramatically higher than elsewhere. Less often discussed is the punishment those that reenter society post-incarceration continue to face—no job prospects, difficulty finding housing, etc. Kids grow up are familiar with the age-old adage, “you do the crime, you do the time.” I don't have space here to unpack that phrase and all its implications. Rather, I'll focus on one component. Kids, and adults, are less familiar with my just released made-up adage, “you do the crime, you serve your time, and you still can't live or work in Anaheim.” Criminal records are the “kick me” sign of greater society.

This is my roundabout way of writing that I'm proud of the dozens of expungements I've worked on this summer. I'm proud to think that because of the work of AppalReD legal aid, people in our community are able to work and provide for themselves and their families, people are able to secure stable housing. We have a long way to go before our legal system treats everyone with respect and dignity—this is a start.

Update 5: Well, here we are at the end of my time as a summer law clerk with AppalReD Legal Aid in Somerset, Kentucky. I came to AppalReD with the goals of making meaningful contributions to the communities of Appalachia and taking lessons away to use in my career as a lawyer. I can proudly say I met both goals.

I had never lived outside of Minnesota before my summer in Kentucky. This allowed me to learn so much about the area and how to be a successful lawyer without having the quiet comfort of my home to retreat to if I ever felt too far outside my comfort zone. Ultimately, I hope to work in Minnesota after law school, however, my time in Kentucky pushed me to learn things about myself I wouldn't have had I been in the place I've always known.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

I am thankful for the people I got to work with every day. I am fortunate to have had a successful career as a first grade teacher before law school, and I have noticed more than a few similarities between public school teachers and legal aid workers. I didn't become a teacher for the money, and I didn't go to law school for it either. It can be challenging at times to feel assured in this conviction when I learn about what my friends are making over the summer at private law firms. However, I'm glad I've had the chance to learn about it and walk away from it—I am more sure of my choices that way. The people I worked with this summer see this similarly to me. These are people that live in the communities and represent their neighbors. They believe everyone should have quality legal representation no matter their tax bracket, just like teachers believe every kid deserves a great education regardless of how much their caregivers make.

I am proud of my work this summer. I will carry so much of my experience with me as I continue through law school and on to my career. Thank you, AppalReD Legal Aid, and thank you, Equal Justice America.