



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1:

I am spending this summer working at Open Door Legal in San Francisco, the largest legal aid provider in the city, with four offices across diverse neighborhoods in SF. I will be on the Family Law team, providing support to individuals facing legally and emotionally complex matters including domestic violence, divorce, and custody disputes, to name just a few. I also hope to gain experience working with people facing numerous overlapping issues, including in areas of Immigration Law and Housing. I'm excited to immerse myself in an organization that embodies the principle that the law belongs to everyone and employs a model that eliminates the financial barriers to legal representation.

Open Door Legal operates like a "general hospital" for legal issues, assisting individuals who cannot afford lawyers and addressing an overwhelming need. The U.S. has the highest poverty rate in the developed world, yet our civil legal systems are largely inaccessible, making organizations like Open Door Legal essential. Homelessness in Bayview has decreased by 50% since Open Door Legal began its work, demonstrating their model's effectiveness in reducing poverty. Despite this success, the need for legal services remains immense. "We never lack clients, only funding, which is the hardest part of our work," said Adrian Tirtanadi, the founder of ODL, in a Q&A session he held with the new interns.

My experiences doing meaningful yet unpaid legal work throughout law school have opened my eyes to the stark contrast between non-profit and for-profit legal work, and it has radicalized my commitment to public interest law. It's inspiring to be part of an organization that's close to achieving 100% access to legal aid in San Francisco. This makes me think about how such a model could translate to other areas of need, both in the state like Oakland and the Central Valley, or beyond in places like rural Mississippi where my journey started.

Thank you to Equal Justice America for this opportunity and to all the donors supporting myself and my peers who are committed to doing this crucial work.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Update 2:

Recently, I went on a walk with Adrian Tirtanadi, the founder of Open Door Legal, and had an incredibly interesting and energizing conversation. As we walked past the iconic Painted Ladies of San Francisco, he asked me what being “radical” meant to me.

I started rambling about abolition and anti-capitalism, sharing how I’ve always felt radical, especially growing up in a place where my racial, religious, political, and identity were constantly under fire. I was pushed to interrogate the status quo early on, and the more I learned about how and why the world functions the way it does, the more “radical” I became. This only continued throughout law school (University of California, Berkeley - School of Law). Rather than making me cynical, it pushed me to think critically and find creative ways to change the narrative. To me, being radical means refusing to ignore the suffering of others just because it is easier or more beneficial for me. It’s about leaning into the intensity of my feelings and letting empathy guide me.

Adrian put it perfectly (and much more concisely): having a radical commitment means being willing to think outside the box and sacrifice the comforts of the status quo to achieve it. Not letting the world wear you down until you inevitably “fall into line.” Not dismissing the needs of the many to satisfy the wants of a few. Not letting the scale of the problem overshadow the value of helping even “just” one person, one neighborhood, one city. In fact, that’s how it has to start! Literally just being that open door for someone facing real and immediate challenges, sitting down with them face to face, and reminding them that they are not alone.

This organization embodies these values in a profound way. ODL takes creative ideas and enacts them, translating radical concepts into words and actions. And it doesn’t hurt that they know how to throw a party! Last week, ODL held its Good Neighbors Gala event (see the cute group photo). It was a highlight of my experience, showcasing the critical role of fundraising and the power of storytelling. Hearing from past clients about their struggles and how ODL provided free, accessible, and comprehensive legal services was moving. Rather than trying to exploit sad stories, I felt like it was celebrating the hope and joy that free legal aid can bring into people’s lives. I am honored to be working in a space that offers a haven for those turned away by others, building a community and empowering people to overcome obstacles to live with peace, dignity, and opportunity.

Update 3:

I recently realized that this summer in San Francisco is my first time actually working in a “big city.” Although my dad grew up here and I have a lot of family in the area, I never felt super familiar with it beyond childhood memories and the countless shows and movies that gave me a romanticized version of the city (always with the Golden Gate Bridge in the background). San Francisco is huge and diverse, and working at different offices around the city has given me a chance to explore and connect with it in new ways.

The commute, though tiring, gives me a moment to decompress and reflect. Observing the streets and people, I see the stark disparity in wealth: unhoused individuals among shiny



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

corporate buildings, young professionals with AirPods passing by makeshift encampments without a glance. These contrasts underscore the importance of orgs like Open Door Legal that are designed to bridge this gap. One person at a time.

It's the everyday things, the basic necessities of life like shelter, a stable income, safety from abuse. Even more, it is about protecting the rights of people to live with dignity regardless of their station in life. In family law, this includes the rights of parents to be there for their children; the rights of individuals to exit toxic or abusive relationships; the rights of families to organize in the way that works best for them.

These interests are deeply personal. But they are shared by people across all socioeconomic levels. And we can't ignore the ways that people facing poverty are treated differently in our legal systems. That includes family courts. Especially after observing a few hearings in SF Unified Family Court, I have seen just how confusing, overwhelming, and intense issues like child custody and visitation are. Not everyone can hire a private attorney. But their rights are just as important as the people who can afford to.

Update 4:

If you know me, you know that I don't usually post on LinkedIn. Even though I understand the importance of celebrating successes and building a professional network, writing about myself here often feels strange and inauthentic. But I'm committed to being true to myself and honest about my journey, because my struggles shape me just as much as my successes.

This summer was challenging for me. I struggled with anxiety, self-doubt, and imposter syndrome. Fortunately, I had amazing co-interns and friends that reminded me I'm not alone, that it's ok to ask for help and take breaks, and that I do bring something valuable to the team. Working in public interest, especially in direct services, means confronting stress, pressure, and trauma—not only for our clients but also for ourselves. Vicarious trauma and burnout are not just buzzwords; they are very real experiences that can affect anyone, regardless of their dedication or work ethic. These challenges are not signs of weakness, nor are they inevitable, but they demand our attention and care.

More than anything, this summer reinforced the importance of support and community—both for our clients and ourselves as advocates. Burnout is real, and we cannot afford to ignore it or pretend that we just have to endure it. We all deserve to feel supported, and it's crucial to recognize that our well-being is just as important as the work we do. The most meaningful aspect of this work isn't the accolades or the paychecks; it's the profound reminder of the beauty of humanity and the impact of simply caring for one another.

At the end of the day, what made this experience truly rewarding were the interactions I had with clients. Despite the anxiety and self-doubt, those moments when a client expressed gratitude for my patience, support, and willingness to guide them through their legal battles made everything worth it. One client, whose divorce and domestic violence restraining order cases I worked on closely, sent me a heartfelt email on my last day, expressing her gratitude and erasing any fears I had about not being or doing enough. Her words are a powerful reminder



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

that the impact of this work goes far beyond financial compensation.

For the first time in a long time, I feel confident in my ability to make a difference, even if it starts small. Rather than chasing wealth or prestige, I'm driven by a radical commitment to envisioning a better world, sharing that vision, and slowly but surely making it a reality. In a profession often overshadowed by stress and burnout, it's these human connections that keep me grounded and remind me why I am on this path.

To all of the people who helped me gain these experiences and insights, who patiently listened to me cry or vent, pushed me to grow, kept me humble and grounded, and reminded me to take care of myself – Thank You.

Dear Krishna,

thank you so much for everything you did and everything you are doing in this world! You are a very beautiful gentle soul don't ever go against that!
Good luck and brilliant success on your next endeavor!

