



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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ORGANIZATION	The Edwin F. Mandel Legal Aid Clinic at the University of Chicago Law School

Final Reflection:

Over the course of this summer, I worked at the Edwin F. Mandel Employment Clinic, a clinic hosted by the University of Chicago Law School and directed by Professor Schmidt, or Randy as he prefers to be called. As with anything, it was essential that we learned the basics, so before I could begin assisting the clinic's clients, I had to review some prep material. After a week of studying Supreme Court cases, the Illinois Supreme Court Rules of Professional Conduct, and videos about the Northern District of Illinois's Settlement Assistance Program for Pro Se Litigants (SAP), it was time to begin.

The first client I met was Mr. V, an experienced police officer whose hours were cut and patrols moved to late nights after he pointed out a lack of diversity at his precinct. Mr. V's story was one I was sympathetic to as a Mexican American man myself, and as someone with family in the Chicago Police Department. By the time I was introduced to Mr. V, however, the work was essentially done, but it was exciting to meet someone who I could personally relate to.

The most impactful client I worked with during the summer was Ms. K, a model employee who had developed a chronic illness and, after 15 years at her place of work, was unceremoniously let go. Ms. K is also a single mother of two and the sole provider for her children, so this betrayal was hardly a small one. Reading through the facts of her case, I immediately empathized with her. No, I have never suffered the sort of physical hurt that she has, but I am the son of a single mother of two. I've witnessed firsthand the anxiety and torment that worrying about finances has on a woman trying to feed and clothe her babies, so the gravity of this case was not lost on me.



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My fellow summer intern and I were not there for the intake interview, that was handled by Randy and other students during the school year, but we did get to draft the settlement demand letter. It was certainly a daunting experience at first as I had ever seen such a document, let alone drafted one. Randy was incredibly helpful during this time as he presented me with copies of demand letters from other cases that he had worked on, and he assured me that there are no set of magic words that must be included. After taking a deep breath, I was able to get through the draft, with an admittedly expected amount of difficulty attempting to calculate interest.

After a series of meetings with Ms. K to make sure that the letter was to her satisfaction, Randy sent the revised copy over to opposing counsel and their client, an insurance company and Ms. K's former employer. Eventually, we received a response letter, of course offering far less than what Ms. K was hoping to receive, but it was clear that settlement was on the table. So, after a series of status hearings with the magistrate judge for the case, a date was set for a settlement conference over Zoom. Randy met with my fellow intern and I with a set of simple instructions: dress like you are going to court and get ready for a long day.

I arrived at my school's clinic building in a full suit after a lengthy commute on a hot summer's day eager to participate, or more likely witness, my first ever settlement conference. I must say, looking back on it now, Randy was certainly underselling how long that day would be as the conference lasted for over six hours. During that time, we sat in our Zoom break-out room with Ms. K on the other end. Most of it was spent twiddling our thumbs or exchanging light banter, but the most important moment was when the judge returned for the umpteenth time. Ms. K, overwhelmed by the anxiety of having to relieve this betrayal over the course of a day with months of lead-up, told the judge with tears in her eyes just how much she was frustrated by the fact that it had come to this, and she implored him to help her finally close this chapter of her life. The judge smiled, thanked her for her candor, and assured her she had nothing to apologize for as she wiped away her tears. Not long after, a settlement was finally reached.

After Ms. K logged off the Zoom call at the end of the conference, I distinctly remember speaking with my fellow intern and Randy about the amount that Ms. K would be receiving. Randy was satisfied an agreement was reached, albeit disappointed how far numbers had to drop, but I asked them both what they thought Ms. K felt about it. We really couldn't tell, too exhausted and hungry to decide, but they agreed when I said, "I just hope she's happy." We did not have to wait very long as, while I was sitting on another boiling train, I saw that Ms. K had sent us an email. Short and sweet, she thanked us "VERY, VERY, VERY much!!!" and told us God bless us for all the effort in her case.



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While my time with Ms. K ended not long after, the summer did not, and work continued in the clinic. During that time, I enjoyed a lot of firsts in my legal career: first cite-check of a filed brief, first client interview, first voluntary motion to dismiss, and more. My summer with the clinic has since ended, but my work will continue this school year as I have opted to remain on for course credit. Thank you to the people at Equal Justice America for making work like mine possible.