



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Final Reflection:

This past summer, I had the privilege of working as a legal intern in Legal Aid Chicago's Immigrants' and Workers' Rights practice group. This incredible experience, which will inform my professional and academic decisions for years to come, would not have been possible without Equal Justice America's financial support.

My mentors weren't only brilliant legal minds from a variety of top-notch law schools, but individuals deeply committed to the humanitarian side of the work. People like Lisa Palumbo, who has spent over thirty-five years fighting for immigration justice. We had weekly case assessment meetings that often felt like law school seminars. I listened and participated in complex conversations about client matters and broad systemic changes under the Trump administration. For example, one day we had an emergency case meeting because United States Citizenship and Immigration Services had both added an asylum fee for the first time in history, and eliminated Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, a lifeline for Legal Aid's minor clients. These are roadblocks for our clients who have already endured unimaginable suffering. We also talked about clients and workshop applicants who had been detained, both inside and outside the courtroom. These were emotional conversations for my mentors, and I saw firsthand how seriously they take the responsibility of helping people navigate an impossible system.

Beyond meetings, I had my own caseload of clients for which I was the primary advocate and point of communication. This communication was typically in Spanish, and I feel my legal Spanish skills infinitely developed this summer. YL was one of my first clients, and I followed her case throughout my ten weeks. She initially filed for asylum jointly with her husband, who later sexually assaulted her. We then had to file a motion to sever her application from her husband. Under the current administration, asylum is even more of a lifeline because having a pending asylum application after the government makes a Bona Fide Determination (BFD) – a threshold inquiry made post-filing – an applicant is no longer subject to removal. YL eventually came in to



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do a deposition for us to prepare her for an upcoming master calendar hearing. Both I and the paralegal present teared up and had to take breaks throughout this three-hour deposition. YL could have been me – we're the same age – but our lives could not be more different. YL and I became very close, and I am still in touch with the attorney on her case.

YL was not the only client I became heavily emotionally invested in. After being shot in the head by a stranger, SC's husband left her for another woman because her physical recovery (she is still half paralyzed) was too much for him. Unable to work, SC and her undocumented children live alone in extreme poverty. I helped review her police reports and secure U-certifications, and eventually we filed for a U visa (a visa for victims of violent crime who cooperate with law enforcement). The weight of SC's survival was always in the room, as well as the desperate nature of her situation.

My most research-intensive case was for FA, a film professor from Afghanistan. We were preparing him for his asylum interview. Asylum interviews are rarely granted, and asylum even less so. FA was in a dire situation – he and his family would almost certainly be murdered by the Taliban if forced to return. I did country conditions research on his multiple minority identities, which required me to get very strategic given the lack of transparency of the current Afghan government about specific policies. I looked through banned book lists, newspaper articles, and recent academic work, then secured certified translations. We confirmed details with him in an hours-long deposition. Piecing his final application together was painstaking and eventually, very satisfying. The interview went well, and we are currently awaiting the results.

In C's case, I had to interpret a recent BIA decision that my attorney mentors had not worked with before. *Matter of Q Li* expanded the scope of mandatory detention, and C had just received a fingerprinting appointment request. Under the Trump administration, this means a 50-50 chance someone is going to be detained. I had to go through AILA advisories and make an analogous argument to other immigration standards, differentiating C's case from *Q Li*'s based on proximity to the border. This truly felt like practicing law, not just regurgitating it.

I came to Legal Aid Chicago hoping to learn something about myself professionally and make a difference in a few people's lives. I did not fully appreciate prior to this experience just how much every legal theory and abstract concept is derived from a human being's reality. I feel even more determined and prepared to continue engaging with humanitarian immigration law throughout law school and hopefully in my future career.

Thank you so much for this opportunity.