



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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My name is Nikola Jaksic – I’m a rising 3L at the American University Washington College of Law (AUWCL), writing to tell you about my rewarding summer in DC as a legal intern at the Asian Pacific American Legal Resource Center (APALRC). The APALRC started in the 90s with law students that wanted to help serve the needs of the DMV community with a helpline, since language barriers precluded many community members from getting access to the legal help that they needed. Over the years, this project grew, to the point where now the organization helps with issues surrounding housing, immigration, as well as continuing to manage the help line to folks in a number of different languages including Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Hindi.

As a legal intern, my tasks were basically twofold, helping our staff attorneys with immigration matters for our clients, ranging from naturalizations, renewal of forms protecting lawful permanent residents or research for more involved cases like trafficking visas. In the context of our legal cases, I was encouraged to, and often would, reach out directly to clients. An old attorney once told me that lawyers are essentially the world’s best paid customer service representatives, and having worked in that field years ago, I know the importance of listening to people. They want a positive resolution to their case, obviously, but oftentimes they want to be heard. In our context, people are sometimes explaining away why they have a speeding ticket on their record. They’re nervous, they know times are scary and that many parts of the government are looking for reasons not to admit them. In this context, they just need someone to remind them that it’s going to be ok and that one speeding camera does not lead to deportation.

One of the most difficult but teachable moments of the summer concerned a client which had been with the APALRC for months before I arrived. She was there for a naturalization, quite



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routine, all things considered. She also had not had any criminal past, had family in the United States, and had stayed long enough to apply for citizenship. The issue was a part of the form on the N-400 citizenship application which requires applicants to list their addresses, employment and trips outside of the United States for the last five years. My managing attorney could not get reliable and consistent answers about these dates from our client.

She thought that perhaps, given my clients limited English and my fluent Spanish, I would be able to communicate better with her. To my regret, I was not. Communication with her was infrequent and jumbled, and after a few weeks my managing attorney scheduled a meeting with her on a Friday (a rarity, since we all worked from home Mondays and Fridays), but at the meeting, which lasted hours longer than it was supposed to, it was clear that our client would not be able to provide these details. She had lots of paystubs but no W2s, photos outside of an airplane but no ticket receipts. After we finalized the meeting, my managing attorney, perhaps sensing my frustration, bought me a beer in the middle of the day and said she would review what we had, but that it was very likely we had done all we could for the client and would have to not represent her anymore.

In spite all of these difficulties, it was incredibly hard to let her go as a client. When my managing attorney confirmed this was likely the direction we would go in, I offered to have another meeting with her. I'm an intern, my time is less valuable, maybe this time she'd understand etc etc. My supervising attorney stood firm, however. We are not a document dump organization, she has had ample opportunities to provide these documents, and a final meeting to wipe the slate clean during which she was not able to. And even if we do represent her, my manager said, what happens during an interview with USCIS? How much more time will we use on her case, and not on others which will be easier and will more certainly lead to positive outcomes for people and their families? How will the rest of our attorneys look if we are unable to present solid and complete applications?

I've thought about her case for a lone time since the beginning of the summer when all of this happened, especially as someone interested in working in immigration law. I was torn between feeling like I'd failed her and feeling like she'd failed us. If an attorney asked me to track when I had gone on a flight, within five minutes I would be able to produce receipts by email. My parents, also immigrants to this country, had all of their documentation sorted and with corresponding evidence when we went to our attorney, and would never have been in the same position as my client. Then again, my father's company sponsored him. They arranged a lawyer for him to speak to and work with. Our client was working two part-time jobs to make ends meet. I'm still no closer to having a definitive opinion on her conduct over the summer, but I don't think I need to. I just need to remember that clients have complex lives going on, and



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telling someone we cannot help them does not mean we think they're a bad person, but sometimes you have to draw lines and help who you can help.

The helpline, during which prospective clients called and left voicemails with legal concerns, was a more consistently positive and uplifting influence on my summer. We would review client's voicemail, note whether we could help them or not, and then attempt to contact them back to either begin the intake process or at the very least refer them to organizations either in their geographic area, or ones better able to deal with the issues they were facing. We used a language line to help with translation for prospective clients calling in a language I did not understand. Volunteers or employees translated for me as I communicated with folks about their legal issues and desired outcomes. I was always struck with how helpful the translators were, jumping in to explain something, and oftentimes thanking me at the end of the call for the work I was doing. Especially now, any chance to not feel alone and isolated in the work was deeply humanizing, and I was reminded time and again that even beyond our little team and organization, people cared and wanted to help.

The APALRC, like many non-profits, has not been immune from the funding slashes that have plagued the immigration space. Many of our initiatives are funded through Maryland or Virginia now to make up for the gap in federal funds. Institutional organizations like Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) are being forced to dramatically scale back the levels of counsel that they can provide for clients, not because of a reduction in need. Quite the opposite, at a time when we are detaining more immigrants, more children and more people who have not committed crimes in the United States, the government is doing its best to dismantle the protections and tools advocates have tirelessly worked towards. In times like these, the opportunity to help these communities feels like a privilege, and with support like the EJA Summer Fellowship, it was possible for me. For that, I will always be very grateful.