



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2026

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1: Those of you who know me know that my ambition to become an attorney has always been motivated by my desire to help people and my upbringing as an environmentalist. These two passions have combined into the pursuit of a career in environmental justice (EJ). Throughout my legal education I have had amazing opportunities in the EJ space, working with marginalized communities experiencing disproportionate environmental harms.

This summer I'm proud to be with the Environmental Justice team at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid. Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) provides a wide variety of civil legal services to low-income communities across 68 counties of south and west Texas. After a challenging second year of law school, my first few weeks at TRLA have reminded me of exactly why I'm doing this. I have been working on issues at the cutting edge of environmental law as well as on traditional EJ cases. Communities in this part of the state, communities like mine in the Rio Grande Valley, experience industrial pollution, water insecurity, high energy costs, and extreme weather. Being at TRLA this summer is teaching me how to apply what I'm learning in school and giving me the opportunity to serve my community.

My work at TRLA is made possible through grants to support public interest work like the one I received from Equal Justice America. EJA supports hundreds of law students around the country every year to ensure that low-income communities receive the legal services they need and students are compensated for their work. This summer I'm grateful to be among them.

Update 2: In my first few weeks at TRLA, the office held a press conference to announce the filing of a consumer protection lawsuit. TRLA's client was sued by a solar panel company that alleged she had signed a contract for the purchase and installation of solar panels on her home



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

but never paid for either. The client, a lifelong El Paso resident and a grandmother, alleged the opposite: that she never agreed to purchase or intended to purchase solar panels for her home. The solar company allegedly obtained her signature through fraudulent means, then never came back to her house to complete the job. Solar panels were never installed, nor did TRLA's client receive an invoice for the purchase. Instead, the company sued her for alleged non-payment of over \$100,000.

El Paso is located in the Chihuahuah Desert, the largest desert in North America, and is often referred to as Sun City. As such, solar power is an especially cost-effective and environmentally friendly source of energy here. Given the urgent need to transition to renewable energy, and the ample opportunity in the region, TRLA invited representatives from pro-solar and pro-consumer organization Solar United Neighbors to speak at the press conference to stress two very important points. First, there are legitimate, trustworthy companies which sell and install solar panels. Second, people should not be afraid of getting scammed in their transition to solar energy because TRLA is prepared to defend them from predatory companies.

To me, this press conference highlighted the importance of legal aid organizations. Because TRLA has attorneys working in a wide variety of practice areas, it can address cross-cutting legal issues and protect consumers' interests while encouraging sustainability.

Update 3: This summer I have been very fortunate to have the opportunity to split my time and work at two different legal aid offices. I spent the first eight weeks of the summer at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid in El Paso, Texas, working with the Environmental Justice team on a variety of cases very close to my heart. For the remaining five weeks of the summer, I've been at the Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights Project in Mexico City. ProDESC, by its Spanish acronym, is an impact litigation non-profit that represents communities and collectives in environmental protection, human rights, and labor rights cases. ProDESC is unique because it utilizes a feminist and intersectional methodology to provide the most comprehensive and impactful representation possible to its client communities. The organization predominantly represents Indigenous groups, agricultural workers, and other similarly vulnerable communities across Mexico, Central and South America.

As an aspiring environmental and human rights attorney, it's very important to me to learn about the practice of law in other countries. Among the many things I have learned from my professors at Berkeley Law is that there are innumerable devoted practitioners around the world doing groundbreaking work. At ProDESC I've been learning how US consumption of products that originate in Latin America, coffee for example, drives deforestation, displacement of Indigenous communities, and violence in Central America in a way that is made invisible by the global supply chain. These issues, which are international in nature despite having the most



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

significant impact in Latin America, highlight how environmentalism and defense of human rights must transcend borders, languages, and cultures.

I'm thrilled to be at ProDESC for even a short time and to learn about the practice of environmental law and human rights work in Mexico. I'm also very grateful to Equal Justice America for making it possible for me to do legal aid work in two countries this summer.

Update 4: I have learned so much in the short time I've been at ProDESC. I am working with the Transnational Justice team on a variety of cases both in Mexico and in Central America. Through observing how the organization selects cases and develops its legal strategy I'm starting to grasp how the practice of environmental and human rights law is different in Mexico than in the U.S., including, in some cases, security concerns that are unique to Latin America.

I've been doing fascinating research on a variety of international environmental issues. For example, I learned that European companies sell chemicals that are banned in the European Union to their Latin American partners and subsidiaries. Even those countries widely considered on the world stage to be bastions of environmentalism are taking advantage of the more relaxed environmental protections in Latin America to make money selling product they know are dangerous. I'm also learning about global supply chains of products that originate in Latin America and how American consumption of these products, coffee for example, drives deforestation, displacement of Indigenous communities, and violence in Central America.

Learning about these issues, which are international in nature despite having the most significant impact in Latin America, further highlights how environmental and human rights issues transcend borders. Consumption of everyday products in the US has significant impact in Latin America in a way that is made invisible by the global supply chain. Most of the time these harms take place in the context of legal business dealings, meaning that the only remedy for the affected communities is to go through the civil legal system.

Final Reflection: Now that summer break is over and I reflect on the past few months, I am filled with gratitude for the many opportunities and experiences I was afforded at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid and el Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Culturales y Sociales. Over the course of thirteen weeks at two organizations in two countries, I learned from dedicated and talented practitioners, developed my advocacy skills, and served the communities I went to law school to serve. I drafted pleadings, spoke at county commissioner meetings, and went to the federal courthouse in Mexico City. I had the opportunity to work on a wide variety of cases involving a range of environmental issues including community opposition to data centers, application of water quality regulations to rural water utilities, the impact of proximity to industrial pollutants on low income communities, the impact of pesticides on agricultural



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

workers, and violence against Indigenous communities due to corporate resource extraction. While the bulk of my workload was focused on environmental justice, I also worked on cases involving intangible cultural heritage and intellectual property, family law, farm worker advocacy, and immigration issues.

My summer was also challenging at times. Transitioning between offices, legal systems, and languages required me to think on my feet and be adaptable. I had to work hard in order to get the most out of both opportunities, and I gave myself no time off after finals or in between jobs in order to make it work. The most rewarding aspect, though, was getting to know so many interesting, hardworking, and mission-driven advocates. Both offices provided a fun and supportive environment, and I had the chance to learn from people of diverse professional backgrounds. My intern cohort at TRLA was fabulous; we got along so well and often worked together. At ProDESC, the legal team shared lunch every day, and they made me feel at home in one of the world's largest cities.

I learned so much, and I thought often about why I'm pursuing a career in law. As anyone who has been through law school knows, it's easy to lose sight of your motivation when you're in the thick of the semester balancing classes with research projects, extracurriculars, and other obligations. Working with TRLA and ProDESC brought me back to my why. Last week I began my final year of school full of energy and with a renewed sense of purpose thanks to the work I did over the summer. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel now, and it is taking what I learned in Berkeley, El Paso, and Mexico City back to my community to be the change I want to see. I am so grateful to Equal Justice America for helping make it possible.