



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2026

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Zhongqiu Li
LAW SCHOOL	Columbia Law School
ORGANIZATION	Texas RioGrande Legal Aid

Update 1: I'm in Eagle Pass, Texas, spending my summer interning at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid. TRLA is a civil legal aid nonprofit, and my first two weeks here have already given me a massive mix of hands-on experience. I've been working on everything from handling Transfer on Death Deeds and Affidavits of Heirship, to analyzing child support modifications based on life changes, finding legal defenses for a Kickapoo tribal member, and trying to untangle property title disputes made complicated by family conflicts.

One of my favorite experiences so far was heading over to the Maverick County courthouse to research public records. Standing in the back room and looking through these massive, historical, leather-bound books to trace title history was honestly pretty cool. Property class came to life in a very real, tangible way that you just don't get in a classroom.

I also started doing client intakes. Interviewing clients, writing down their inquiries, and figuring out their legal needs has been eye-opening. Most people come to legal aid because they have a story to tell, and I'm just glad I can be the one there to actually listen.

Right now, I'm preparing discovery for a property dispute. I'm drafting requests for production, interrogatories, and admissions. It's exciting to actually be a part of discovery. It's such a unique American instrument in civil procedure, and it's actually one of the main things that drew me to the American legal system in the first place.

Update 2: My last two weeks with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) in Eagle Pass have been just as exciting and eye-opening as the first. Recently, my supervisor, Javier Riojas, took me and two other summer law clerks to visit the Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas courthouse.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Located on tribal land just south of the Eagle Pass city limits, the courthouse looks like a humble house from the outside, lacking both a grand entrance and a sign. Inside, however, it is highly organized and technologically advanced. The day's hearings were conducted in a hybrid format, a first for me, as I had only ever seen fully in-person or entirely remote proceedings. The setup had many moving parts: the judge presided remotely from out of state, several defendants called in from jail, and some defense counsel appeared via video from their offices. Meanwhile, the prosecution, the remaining defendants, and local counsel were present in person. Though I initially doubted this complex arrangement would work, the proceedings ran flawlessly, with clear audio and video for everyone involved.

The docket consisted entirely of arraignments. On the drive over, Javier explained the general procedures and the specifics of his cases, emphasizing the value of negotiating with the prosecution and the tribe's child welfare department. He noted that even if a party backs out at the last minute, the effort to reach a deal is always worthwhile. Javier also gave us a lesson in client care and work ethic. When one client faced a potential non-appearance, Javier took immediate action to locate him and help him get to the courthouse before the docket closed, successfully avoiding a bench warrant.

At the conclusion of the docket, Javier formally introduced us to Judge Kara Bacon. She welcomed us warmly and expressed how much she enjoys seeing new faces in tribal court. On our way out, we also chatted with a court officer who shared that she had just begun studying for the LSAT. Hearing about her law school dreams was the icing on the cake, and I am fully rooting for her.

I haven't stopped thinking about that day. Seeing Javier go above and beyond for his client, combined with Judge Bacon's genuine warmth, reminded me exactly why I chose to pursue public interest law. The experience also exposed me to an entirely new career path. I learned that the Kickapoo tribal court allows attorneys licensed in any U.S. jurisdiction to practice before it, provided they master the specific tribal codes. Tribal law is a field I had not previously considered, but it is one I would absolutely love to practice in the future.

Update 3: I've spent the past two weeks doing many more direct client interviews. A large portion of our recent caseload involves property issues, particularly Transfer on Death Deeds (TODDs). These are valuable tools for our clients: they only transfer property rights after the owner passes, they help protect the estate from the Medicaid Estate Recovery Program (MERP), and they allow the client to change their mind later without complications.

However, working closely with TODDs has also shown me the limits of legal intervention. Several clients have come in to cancel and rewrite their deeds because the family members they



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

originally named didn't actually care for them, or because they felt pressured by relatives visiting from out of town. As an advocate, we want to fix our clients' problems, but the law cannot solve underlying family conflicts. As long as a client is of clear mind and wants to change their beneficiaries, we help them do it. It is a stark reminder that legal tools can only do so much.

I am also learning the importance of looking at a client's entire situation rather than just processing their immediate request. During what seemed like a routine TODD appointment, Michael, my supervising attorney for that case, reviewed the client's warranty deeds and noticed that her land configuration created unexpected exposure to MERP recovery and social benefit risks. We advised her on how to restructure her property holdings to preserve her assets.

I have also seen how complicated real-world property disputes can become. I reviewed a case involving a neighborhood where a cascading mapping error occurred decades ago. One person built their house one lot over from the land they actually owned, causing the next neighbor to build one lot off, and so on down the street. Today, residents hold warranty deeds for land their houses do not sit on. Years ago, several residents attempted to organize and replat the land to correct the error, but the initiative ultimately failed due to a lack of funding and legal support.

That situation highlighted a recurring theme in legal aid: the feeling of powerlessness. Many clients become paralyzed when faced with the legal system. I helped a client prepare a protected property claim form after she faced a civil debt lawsuit. She had been too intimidated to engage with the court initially, which had allowed the case to proceed without her input. I have seen other clients get pushed into bad loans, and out of fear and a lack of resources, they ignore the notices while the debt simply grows.

These past two weeks have made it clear that legal aid is about much more than drafting documents. It is about stepping in to advocate for people when they are too intimidated or under-resourced to navigate the justice system alone.

Update 4: The other summer interns and I drove out to Del Rio with my supervisor, Javier, for a federal sentencing hearing in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas. Our client was one of the last defendants to be sentenced in a massive gang-related case. In the weeks leading up to the hearing, we were each assigned different legal issues to research in an effort to knock down his offense level.

My focus was on researching Fifth Circuit precedents regarding the "safety valve" exception, looking for ways to argue that our client met the strict criteria to bypass mandatory minimums. It really showed me how differently circuit courts can interpret the same federal statutes. I also read through the full transcripts of the client's interviews with federal agents, as well as the



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

probation officer's Pre-Sentence Report. Reading those transcripts gave me a very raw look at the real dynamics an individual actually faces when sitting across from interrogating police. You could see the psychological pressure and the tactics used by the agents, which made it clear how a word or action in that room can affect a sentencing outcome. Combining that with the PSR made my criminal law professor's classroom lectures feel incredibly real.

The hearing took the whole afternoon. Sitting in the federal courtroom watching seven co-defendants get sentenced one after the other was heavy. It was eye-opening to see how differently people handled standing before the judge. Most, including our client, admitted fault and asked for leniency. One woman had a concrete plan for her life after release, laying out her employment goals, but it was tough watching the judge remind her how hard it will be to ever go back to her licensed profession with a felony record. You could almost tell everyone in the gallery felt for her. Another defendant tried a different tactic, claiming he was forced into a plea deal and lied to. The judge quickly shut him down and lectured him for trying to game the system at the last minute, a move that likely cost him his point reductions for Acceptance of Responsibility.

Watching the attorneys in action was just as interesting. The defense lawyers and federal prosecutors chatted casually before the session started, but they flipped a switch into full professional advocacy the second the judge took the bench.

Our client ended up getting a sentence very close to time served. He'll be released soon. Javier was thrilled with the outcome, and so were we. Right after the hearing, one of the client's family members came up to Javier in the hallway and sincerely thanked him for his hard work. Seeing her genuine relief was one of the best parts of the trip. It made me realize that helping a client and their family through the terrifying machinery of the federal criminal system is a completely different kind of reward than anything monetary. I know I still have a lot to learn about federal practice, but seeing this process play out makes me want to work that much harder through the rest of law school.

Final Reflection: I am immensely grateful to Equal Justice America for supporting my summer fellowship at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) in Eagle Pass. This summer provided a meaningful opportunity to translate my law school education into real-world advocacy, and it was a privilege to serve such a welcoming and resilient community.

Over the past weeks, my work spanned a wide variety of practice areas. I collaborated with clients navigating major milestones and consequences in their lives—from securing a family homestead to facing federal sentencing. The primary challenge I observed was the sheer intricacy of the law. One of the most rewarding aspects of my experience was providing clarity,



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

guidance, and support to unrepresented individuals as they navigated complex property deeds, civil discovery, and state and federal regulations.

Victories this summer took many forms, driven by the dedication of my supervising attorneys. Some wins were quiet but life-changing. For example, Michael caught a hidden deed issue during a routine intake, helping a client restructure her property to preserve her vital social benefits. Other victories required extraordinary, on-the-ground commitment. I will never forget watching Javier drive to assist a client in reaching a tribal court hearing on time, safely averting a bench warrant.

The moments that will stay with me most are the deeply human ones. We helped secure a sentence close to time served for a client. Standing in the courthouse hallway afterward and witnessing the overwhelming relief on his family's faces was unforgettable. Similarly, conducting initial client intakes taught me that before we ever file a motion or draft a deed, our most important service is simply giving clients a safe space to be heard.

Professionally, my time at TRLA was a period of immense growth. I learned to trace title histories through massive, leather-bound ledgers at the county clerk's office, draft civil discovery, and analyze federal sentencing guidelines. Personally, this experience shaped the vision for my future career. I leave Eagle Pass inspired by the strength of our clients and the compassion of the TRLA attorneys. Thank you, EJA, for making this invaluable experience possible and for reaffirming my commitment to public interest law.