



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT

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Final Reflection:

My favorite memory from this summer was going to Capitol Hill to advocate for increased funding for public education programs for children with alternative learning styles and learning needs. The issue was a very specific area of education law, focused on children who may need special education services, accommodations, or a particular learning environment in order to thrive. But what made the experience so meaningful to me was realizing how an issue that initially seemed so specific could touch so many people and communities.

There was a group of advocates teachers, administrators, activists, but mainly parents who came to Capitol Hill from Florida, Oklahoma, the Midwest, the South, New York, and other parts of the country. Each one brought a different story about their family, their child, and the services their child needed. As a parent myself, I found myself listening to these stories not only as a law student and advocate, but as someone who understands the responsibility and hope that comes with wanting the best for your child. Some of the families looked very different from my own on the outside, but as they talked, I began to recognize how much their experiences had in common. They were parents trying to navigate a public education system and make sure their children could access the resources they needed.

For some, those resources would have cost thousands of dollars without public funding money that many families simply did not have. When those programs are cut, the impact is not simply a line item in a budget. It can mean a parent having to figure out how to provide something for their child that they may not be able to afford on their own. Sitting with these parents made that reality much more tangible to me.

As I listened to them, I kept thinking about how our issues, no matter where we go and no matter who we are, touch and overlap. Education is such an interesting issue area because it affects everyone, but it does not affect everyone in the same way. For families whose children



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require additional accommodations or specialized learning environments, cuts to these programs can have consequences that are immediate and deeply personal.

What I found particularly meaningful was watching the parents advocate for themselves. Coming to Capitol Hill and making the hard asks about what they needed in their communities was not necessarily comfortable for everyone. Many of them were outside of their comfort zones. But they came anyway. They sat in those meetings, told their stories, asked difficult questions, and spoke about what they wanted their communities to have. You could hear the passion in the way they talked about their children.

There was something powerful about watching parents recognize that they had something important to contribute to the conversation. They may not have considered themselves policy experts or professional advocates, but they knew their communities because they lived there. They knew what their children needed because they experienced it every day. Being on Capitol Hill gave them an opportunity to bring that knowledge directly into spaces where decisions about their communities are made.

After the meetings, we sat together and talked about strategy. We discussed what they wanted to see, what they wished they had asked for, and what they might do moving forward. We also talked honestly about some of the hard realities of the political climate we are in right now. Those conversations stayed with me because they reminded me that advocacy does not end when a meeting is over. It is an ongoing process of listening, organizing, asking difficult questions, and figuring out what is possible.

That lesson carried into other parts of my summer, including my work on a bail amendment issue. We often talk about the right to bail as though it is settled, but there are ongoing debates about what that right means and how it is protected. Working on that issue made me think about how legal research and policy work can help inform how people and communities understand their rights and what they can ask of their local and state governments. It also reminded me that the work of a lawyer is not simply to know the law. It is to understand how the law operates in people's lives.

That may have been the most important lesson I took from this summer: the work I want to do is impossible without community. As lawyers, we may be the people writing briefs, researching the law, developing policy, and making the arguments. But we cannot do that work well without listening to the people who are actually experiencing the issues we are trying to address. Their stories give meaning to the work.

I think there is a natural desire, especially for people who want to work in public interest law, to want to solve these problems completely—to get to a place where people no longer have to experience them or carry them. I certainly want to see that kind of change. But the truth is that we are not there yet. Until we get there, there is work for everyone to do.

It was grounding to start and end my summer working with parents and real people who are directly impacted by cuts to education and other public programs. It was an honor and a privilege to be part of that experience. Some of the parents I met are people I still talk to in a



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personal capacity, which makes the experience even more meaningful. I am grateful to Advancement Project for allowing me to have that opportunity outside of the office and outside of Zoom.

As I head into my last year of law school, I know that this is something I will carry with me. As a parent, a law student, and a future attorney, I was reminded that the people most affected by our laws and policies must remain at the center of the work. I entered the summer thinking about the law and the policies we were working to change. I left with a deeper appreciation for the people who give that work its purpose. The work is not just about making arguments for people; it is about making space for people to speak for themselves, listening when they tell us what they need, and using our skills to help turn those experiences into meaningful change.