

August 11, 2010

Mr. Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
Building II - Suite 204
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, Virginia 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My name is Alexandria Cuff, and I am writing to evaluate my fellowship experience with Equal Justice America. This summer, I interned with the Legal Aid Justice Center in Richmond, Virginia. The Legal Aid Justice Center is a non-profit organization that provides legal services to low-income individuals. The Richmond office focuses on the areas of housing, consumer, employment law, as well as advocating and representing the rights of children in the education and juvenile systems.

When I was first offered the position with the Legal Aid Justice Center last spring, I remember being excited about the opportunity. My heart has always been with public service, and I was grateful for the chance to be able to learn more about public service through the eyes of the law. From the point I accepted the position until the week before I started, however, I did not think much about what the job would entail. Walking into the office on the first day, I really did not know what to expect. Looking back, I think that was for the best, as I soon learned some days no one can know what will walk in the office door. Now, I would not trade my experience at the Legal Aid Justice Center for any other opportunity, and I truly did come to love my job this summer.

In reflecting upon the experience as a whole, I am most appreciative of the personal interaction the internship brought. In my position, I was talking with clients, conducting interviews, and doing intakes every week. Throughout the summer, I also observed court proceedings and administrative hearings and contacted clerk's offices. This type of client and personal interaction I found very beneficial. I soon realized it will be an aspect that must be part of my future positions in my legal career. Although my knowledge of housing, consumer, and employment knowledge grew through conducting research and drafting various court documents, I often found some days I learned just as much, if not more, when I just spoke with potential clients, conducted intakes, or watched how an attorney would advise a client. As the weeks progressed, I realized it becomes a skill an attorney develops to be able to know when or when not to take on a client's case. I learned it is an art to be able to listen to a client, understand their problem, and point them in the right direction in the limited time the attorney may have with a client. I began to understand a careful balance can exist in the legal aid business between caring too much, not caring enough, being too kind, and not being kind enough with the client.

Most importantly, my experience this summer has shown me the passion that drives those involved with legal aid organizations. I remember early on asking one of the attorneys how he got involved in legal aid and what has kept him here for over fifteen years. He told me he always knew he wanted to pursue this path but getting involved in housing and consumer law specifically just happened to be the direction his commitment took. But now, as in the past, he said it is still just about helping those who everyone else tries to walk over. He told me the poor do not have a fighting chance out there often unless someone listens to them. He said when you can truly help someone—that is what makes my day. I soon found this fervor is what made me come to love my experience this summer. I find myself leaving with a true respect for the passion that working for legal aid requires. Some of my most treasured memories of this summer were the little moments when this dedication would show itself, moments such as an attorney screaming at the interns, "Well that is how you stop an eviction!" or the joyous walk back from court because our client was allowed to keep their housing voucher.

These little victories for us were life-changing for our clients. The feeling that realization brings is truly invigorating and contagious.

One of my most unforgettable stories from this summer was a Hispanic client we had. Throughout the summer, I was able to help many of the attorneys with translating for our Hispanic clients and became involved in many of their cases. This Hispanic client came to us because his apartment was absolutely covered in mold. The apartment complex would not address his complaints about the problem and he was stuck in a lease that automatically renewed and therefore could not vacate the property without breaking the lease. Although the mold had been a problem since last November, he had not known where to go for help, and the language barrier had been a problem. Finally when he came to the Legal Aid Justice Center, he found an attorney who would listen and saw the gravity of his situation and how he could help. I sat in on the client interviews and assisted with the case. I went out to meet a city health inspector who went to the apartment to see the problem. I took pictures of the mold and went with the attorney to bring a sample to a mold expert. I helped draft a Subpoena Duces Tecum for the case. While the case is set for trial later this month and last I heard a settlement was still being negotiated between the parties, I still perceive this case as one of the greatest “victories” I witnessed this summer. Our client was just so gracious that the attorney and I were helping him—that he had found someone that would listen to him and took the opportunity to see and understand the gravity of his problem. It was his gratitude, the feeling I got from being able to help him, and the attorney’s dedication to this client’s case that really showed me why I believed it is so important to be involved in legal aid and pro bono work.

Overall this summer, in addition to expanding and developing my legal skills, I learned so much about life in general. My experience this summer has left me with a knowledge and awakening I certainly did not expect to receive and one I will certainly take with me in the future. With my exposure to housing, consumer, and employment law, I began to see how the system works for everyone, not just our potential clients. I was exposed to issues I did not even realize were issues, such as the difficulties that can occur in obtaining and maintaining public housing assistance. I was also able to see how much my Spanish skills can be of service in many areas of the law. Most importantly, first hand I was able to work with a population that can seem so distant in law school.

The experience I had this summer at the Legal Aid Justice Center has only further motivated to stay involved in public service and pro bono opportunities during law school and beyond. It has motivated me to continue volunteering at the Legal Aid Justice Center this fall. I am so grateful for the opportunity I had and the knowledge I gained. I look forward to continue my involvement and to use the skills and understanding I acquired in my classes this fall. I know I will leave behind this summer with a very positive Summer Fellowship experience with Equal Justice America and the Legal Aid Justice Center, and I thank both organizations again for their support throughout my internship.

Sincerely yours,

Alexandria Cuff
University of Richmond
T.C. Williams School of Law
J.D. Candidate, 2012