

Dan Ruben
Executive Director,
Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 204
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I would really like to thank you and Equal Justice America for financially supporting my work with the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant (EBSC). My work this summer solidified my future goals of working in public interest and specifically working with and for populations who have historically been marginalized by our legal system.

This summer my work was divided mainly into two aspects; working with asylum seekers as they began the process of applying affirmatively for asylum, including interviewing potential clients, filling out immigration forms, and drafting clients' declarations, and then representing clients in their actual asylum interviews.

I loved my work at EBSC because I was able to work one-on-one with individuals and really see how asylum law can save lives. Working with my client, Jorge,¹ taught me about how difficult it can be for victims to come forward and tell their stories, but also how rewarding it is to help them find safety. Jorge fled Guatemala after suffering continual persecution for being gay. As a child he was targeted by a teacher and raped repeatedly for three years. His teacher knew he would not tell anyone for fear of them thinking he was gay. Jorge was also continually made fun of in school and by his own family members. His cousins constantly beat him up and called him horrible names. At one point his cousins hurt him so severely he was hospitalized with broken ribs and needed over sixty stitches. Eventually the trauma Jorge experienced in Guatemala was too much so at the age of sixteen he decided to come to the U.S. where he heard life was better for LGBT. The trip to the U.S. was extremely dangerous for Jorge. He was travelling through Mexico with other immigrants and had almost reached the U.S. border when they were captured and held captive by the Zeta gang. The gang mainly attacked the group to get money out of them, but the gang members targeted Jorge and the one woman in the group and raped them repeatedly. When Jorge finally made it to the U.S. he was extremely traumatized. He went to live with some family he had in California but when they found out he was gay they kicked him out of their house. He moved to San Francisco and found steady work in a restaurant where he still works now. He barely makes enough to afford rent and food but he is getting by.

I met Jorge this summer and began his asylum application for him. We met on multiple occasions to discuss everything he had been through and to write it all down in a declaration. Talking with Jorge was both heartbreaking and uplifting. Jorge was and still is suffering from severe depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, but he is trying his best to pick himself up and focus on the positives in his life. He just started taking English classes and has been seeing a psychologist who is helping him overcome his trauma. Jorge was always very appreciative of the

¹ I have changed his name for confidentiality purposes.

work I was doing for his case. Before I left EBSC I was able to file his case for him, and now he is waiting for an asylum interview. There is a chance that he may have to wait for quite some time because of backlogs with USCIS, however pretty soon he will be able to apply for a legal work permit while he waits, which will make life much easier for him. I hope to stay in contact with Jorge and sincerely hope that he will be granted asylum soon.

While I greatly enjoyed helping my clients begin their asylum applications, I do not think I have ever felt better than when my clients actually received asylum. The first client I represented in her asylum interview was named Maria.² Maria is a young Mam Mayan woman from Guatemala. Before she was born her family fled Guatemala when the government started systematically targeting and murdering indigenous Guatemalans. Maria was born in Mexico but Mexico refused to recognize her birth so she was never considered a Mexican citizen. When she was eleven her family returned to Guatemala after hearing things were better. However, shortly after returning they were attacked by masked men who told them they never should have returned and called them “dirty Indians.” The men raped Maria. They returned and raped her again a few years later and then for awhile they did not return and Maria thought she was safe. But after maturing and starting a family, the men attacked her again, this time they told her if she did not leave the country they would kill her. Maria was scared for her life and immediately fled Guatemala, leaving her young son in her parents guardianship. She made it to the U.S. and reunited with her son’s father who had also been persecuted in Guatemala. He told her about asylum and convinced her to come to EBSC and apply.

I met Maria after she had already received an interview date. I spent hours prepping Maria for her interview and working with a translator since Maria only speaks Mam. The day of the interview I was very nervous since it was my first interview. I had told Maria that it was my first interview but she never doubted me. Despite my nerves, Maria’s interview went very well. At the end of the interview I was allowed to make a statement on her behalf as to why she should be granted asylum. Two weeks later Maria received her decision; she was granted asylum. When she came into the office with her asylum papers and her husband both of them were so happy and I was ecstatic just to have been a part of it. We immediately started work on a petition for their son so that he can reunite with his parents soon.

After this summer I am positive that I want to continue to work furthering human rights. Ideally, I would like to work on both impact litigation to bring about immigration reform and directly with immigrants. But I know I could be just as happy in a career in direct-client services for the rest of my life. There was never a dull moment at EBSC and the work was incredibly fulfilling. I am so thankful that I had that experience and I hope I can dedicate myself to similar work in the future.

Thank you so much for allowing me to pursue my passion.

Sincerely,
Amanda Reynoso-Palley
Cornell Law School

² Once again, name changed for confidentiality purposes.