

August 30, 2008

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer, I was privileged to work in New York City as a summer legal intern at Lawyers For Children (LFC), which provides legal and social work services to abused and neglected children, children in the foster care system, and children in high conflict custody cases. I could not have asked for a better internship experience. I was consistently impressed by the work LFC does and by my supervisors' obvious investment in my experience at the organization.

LFC's offices are located just a few blocks from the Manhattan Family Court building, and I was standing within its walls less than fifteen minutes into my first day on the job. Throughout the summer, I was able to observe all kinds of family court proceedings, from intake hearings to permanency hearings, from pre-trial conferences to full-fledged fact-findings with expert medical testimony. I encountered children who had been physically and emotionally abused, children whose parents had voluntarily placed them into foster care, and children whose parents were engaged in vicious custody battles. I also met the other key players in family court proceedings – parents, grandparents, great grandparents, siblings and stepsiblings, social workers, parents' and state attorneys, service providers, and judges.

Back at the office, I was able to draft motions, follow up with clients, conduct research, analyze case files in preparation for trial, and write memos. For one case I was heavily involved in, I did medical research on the infant health problem known as "failure to thrive." I also observed both attorney and social work interviews with clients, and even got to make a home visit.

I worked closely with one of my supervisors on a case in which our client was a six-month old baby whose parents had already lost parental rights to each of their seven older children. LFC had filed what is known as a "1039-b motion" in order to terminate parental rights for the child as quickly as possible. It was one of the most challenging cases I encountered because despite how clear it was that our client would lead a better life if his foster mother could adopt him, my supervisor and I couldn't help seriously sympathizing for his parents. They were homeless and had severe mental health problems and mental disabilities, and had shown themselves entirely incapable of caring for their son, yet they also were well intentioned, loved their child, and very much wanted to raise him. The case exemplified one of the most difficult parts of being a child's attorney – in advocating for one's client, it is sometimes necessary to tear a family apart.

Yet, the challenging nature of my work at LFC only made it more personally uplifting. While the case described above was not concluded when I left, it is likely that, with my help, an infant

will be able to remain in a caring home and become part of a loving family. When I went to visit a mentally delayed six year old boy in his pre-adoptive foster home, I saw how the foster care system and advocacy by organizations like LFC can allow children to grow up safe and happy when they would not otherwise do so.

Even when clients were aging out of foster care without family to call their own, or had backgrounds that were heart-wrenching beyond belief, I gained tremendous solace knowing that I was doing my small part to make their lives that much better. It is hard to imagine people more vulnerable and disenfranchised than children in foster care and high-conflict custody cases; as difficult as it was to witness so many sad stories and see so much struggle, I knew that I was working to improve the lives of those who desperately needed help.

I learned a lot about family law during my summer at LFC, but perhaps more importantly, I saw first hand how remarkable it is to be a legal services attorney. While policy-level litigation is necessary for systemic change, there is nothing quite as empowering to clients as personal, day-to-day representation. I saw how for many clients, just knowing that there was an attorney advocating for their interests and wishes made a tremendous difference in their lives. In one client interview, I watched my supervisor explain to a fifteen-year old girl that we were *her* attorneys, there to represent *her* interests in court, and that everything she told us was privileged and would not be shared without *her* permission. As she then discussed her options with her attorney, I saw a girl who felt powerless in so many facets of her life gain immediate confidence and spirit.

Thank you so much for supporting my work this summer at LFC – it was an experience I'll never forget, and one that will surely shape both my future career choices and the rest of my life.

Sincerely,

Amanda Wittenstein
Harvard Law School, Class of 2010