

June 11, 2008

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you so much for the Equal Justice America spring fellowship, which allowed me to work at Bay Area Legal Aid's domestic violence restraining order clinic in Redwood City. It was a wonderful experience, which helped me grow as an advocate for social change while I assisted the clients of the clinic. The domestic violence clinic, housed in a very small office near the San Mateo courthouse, is, unfortunately, always busy. I was able to assist the two staff attorneys during their daily clinic sessions, in which walk-in clients receive assistance in filling out domestic violence restraining orders. The number of people asking for assistance reached 16 on one particularly busy day, but the resources of the organization remains fixed. Because the two staff lawyers ultimately serve nearly 1,000 people a year, I am grateful to Bay Area Legal Aid and Equal Justice America for the chance to take some of the strain off of the lawyers.

I had one experience, which stands out to me, now that I look back on my semester of volunteer work. One woman came to the clinic seeking a restraining order after 20 years of marriage to a violent ex-Marine. The affidavit she originally wrote contained a few details about explosive episodes with her husband. When I spoke to her more about her experiences, to help expand upon what she had written, she began recounting violent incidents that she hadn't thought about in years. It was remarkable to me how much more convinced she became of the prudence of seeking the restraining order when she finally gave herself a chance to reflect on all she had been through.

What was even more remarkable, though, was how fragile this new confidence and change really was. The client had "taken pity" on her ex-husband during an illness some time back, and when no other relatives would come forward, our client had been convinced to be his power of attorney. With this legal relationship in place, and with some lingering feelings of "pity," as she called it, on her part, our client teetered dangerously on the edge of falling back into the cycle of violence. Another volunteer, a lawyer from another domestic violence organization, gave our client a powerful and frank talk about what she had seen happen to other women who maintained a relationship with the person who had abused them. I learned, while watching this discussion, how to carefully negotiate the legal information versus legal advice distinction, and I also learned how lawyers' experiences with other clients help them understand the real world pressures that clients face.

Bay Area Legal Aid's walk-in clinic is special because the lawyers assist clients with sensitive, very personal and often traumatic issues, all while providing "legal information" and not "legal advice." Although I refer to the people I helped to serve as "clients," none of them

were ever represented personally by the lawyers at the clinic. I leave the semester still debating the pros and cons of a triage, emergency room-style clinic like Bay Legal's – I have never seen such hardworking lawyers who are perpetually preparing for the next rush of people to serve. I imagine that most lawyers could not last at such a job for a long time, and I am glad to have been given a chance to reflect on my own strengths and weaknesses as I consider what to do after graduation. But I also leave this semester understanding more clearly than ever that domestic violence is a complicated and large-scale problem which needs people advocating for change on many, many fronts. I am very grateful to have been given the chance to help the clinic this semester as it addresses one aspect of this serious issue.

Sincerely,

Amy Morgenstern  
Stanford Law School, 2009