

Dan Ruben
Executive Director at Equal Justice America
13540 E Boundary Rd.
Midlothian, VA 23112

August 28, 2016

RE: Summer Fellowship Experience

Dear Mr. Ruben:

While I was very excited to do immigration work this summer, when I first arrived at Catholic Legal Charities, I was nervous. Unaccompanied minors are a vulnerable group; they are children who have experienced abuse, abandonment, or neglect. I worried that I was not fully prepared to interact with them, or that I would be too affected by their stories. On top of that still, I had the ordinary worries associated with having a job for the first time. It turns out the work *was* difficult, but there were also so many positive experiences that I ended the summer feeling inspired. The attorneys I had the privilege to work with really care about their clients, and with all its challenges, they are very passionate about the work that they do. As a rising 2L fresh out of my first year of law school, it was the biggest confirmation that I made the right decision. Lawyering can be a rewarding form of activism.

Over the course of the summer, I had the opportunity to meet with about 8 different children. All of them experienced difficult situations, but they continued moving forward, doing what they could to find a better life. One of the clients that most impacted me actually witnessed the murder of her cousin. She was murdered by her boyfriend, and shortly after, the murderer began threatening our client. He was upset that our client knew too much, not only about the murder, but about other activities he was involved in. Fearing for her life, our client's grandparents encouraged her to flee the country, and she left for the United States, alone.

I formed a very special connection with this client because she felt like one of my peers. She was 16, almost 17, and in one of our first interactions, she felt compelled to question my age. She was surprised to find that I was 23; she had thought I was younger. When I happened to talk to her outside of interviews and hearings, I found that she was so warm and full of life, it was hard to remember everything she had been through. When she was not recounting her story, she was confident, bright, and very optimistic. She shared with me her dreams of becoming a singer, only to say that she would consider law school too. On the day of her hearing, she was very quiet and still, the opposite of what I was used to. I could feel her nerves; I could feel that her life was on the line. It was a huge relief when the judge agreed to have her case administratively closed, allowing us to proceed with her asylum application. It was not a full success, not yet; but it was a step forward, and there was hope.

Learning stories like hers, I felt a drive unlike any I had ever had before. It was very clear to me that our work had *real life* implications. Whether I was doing research, or writing a motion for summary judgment to obtain an order needed for a Special Immigrant Juvenile Visa, it was never lost on me that my work was important. That both motivated me and confirmed my interest in a public interest position.

Thank you for your support, and for contributing to an experience that I will always remember.

Sincerely,
Gabriela Leon
Cornell Law 2018



**Catholic Charities Legal Services
Archdiocese of Miami, Inc.**

Ingraham Building
25 SE 2nd Avenue
Suite 220
Miami, Florida 33131

Telephone: 305-373-1073
Facsimile: 305-373-1173
Broward: 954-486-2070
Miami Springs: 305-887-8333
Homestead: 305-245-0022
Website: www.cclsmiami.org

Dan Ruben
Executive Director at Equal Justice America
13540 E Boundary Rd.
Midlothian, VA 23112

August 24, 2016

RE: Evaluation of Gabriela Leon.

Dear Mr. Ruben:

My name is Felix A. Montanez, and I am an attorney with Catholic Charities Legal Services of Miami. This letter is in response to Part II of the Equal Justice America Fellowship Questionnaire requesting an evaluation of Ms. Leon's fellowship. During her fellowship, Ms. Leon performed all of her assigned tasks quickly and efficiently, with little need for supervision. Ms. Leon is a quick study and very dedicated, and she helped our office greatly during her time here. I was especially impressed by her ability to tackle everything from administrative tasks to complicated research and writing projects with the same determination. Most of the cases on which Ms. Leon worked this summer involved applications for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) for unaccompanied minors from Central America. These children are an extremely vulnerable population, but SIJS applications require dealings with at least 2 different court systems (immigration court and either juvenile or family court), and also with an administrative agency that adjudicates the applications (United States Citizenship and Immigration Service, USCIS). Perhaps the most difficult part of the process is getting the requisite custody order from a Florida court finding that an immigrant juvenile has been abandoned, abused, or neglected by one of her parents. Despite the difficulties, Ms. Leon did an excellent job researching and drafting pleadings in order to get predicate orders for these children, and she was always ready to assist our office's work on behalf of unaccompanied minors.

Ms. Leon also helped draft documents that were later sent to Central America in order to notify necessary parties of newly-filed custody petitions. She drafted a very well-written Motion for Summary Judgment and Brief that we are now using as a template for some family court proceedings. As our office has traditionally dealt with juvenile court for SIJS purposes, we are only now beginning to file petitions in family court, so Ms. Leon's work was particularly valuable because it created solid new templates for filings involving temporary custody, divorces, and actions to establish paternity. Ms. Leon also helped interpret from Spanish to English during some sensitive client interviews, and she translated important supporting documents for children applying for asylum. I rate Ms. Leon's work during her fellowship very highly, and she reflects very positively on Cornell Law School and on Equal Justice America. Please feel free to contact me at (912) 604-5801 or by email at fmontanez@cclsmiami.org if you have any questions about this letter.

Sincerely,

Felix A. Montanez, Esq.