

August 26, 2010

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Before this summer, I could count the number of truly transformative experiences in my life using five fingers on one hand. Now, after working at the Northwest Office of the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago (LAF) this summer, I cannot count such experience using all of my fingers and toes. Before I share a few of those experiences with you, I would like to thank Equal Justice America and its sponsors for generously funding my summer internship at LAF.

The Northwest Office of LAF provides legal services to some of the poorest people in the northwest area of Chicago. However, LAF is more than a legal service office—it is a powerhouse organization that tirelessly advocates for clients in and out of the courtroom and at policy discussions throughout the country. LAF attorneys are among the best in Chicago, and I felt incredibly lucky to be working with such committed and intelligent people this summer. In the Northwest office this summer, there were seven superstar attorneys, who were always willing to answer my questions and offer advice. This summer would not have been such a memorable learning experience without their guidance and support.

Clients come to LAF seeking legal assistance in numerous subject areas, which allowed me to participate in a range of different legal activities. I conducted intake interviews, prepared for and observed administrative and family law hearings, went to eviction court, drafted discovery requests and a brief to the Illinois Employment Security Office, and counseled clients.

When I began conducting intake interviews, I quickly learned that most of our clients were not struggling with only one legal issue. The first client I interviewed was facing eviction, possible termination of her housing voucher, and domestic violence. She was being evicted because her son had turned to violence as a way to protect his mother from domestic violence. Under the tutelage of one of LAF's attorneys, I wrote a cure letter on behalf of the client to the landlord, as an attempt to stop the eviction proceeding. As I gave the client the letter, I told her that it would not guarantee the landlord would stop the eviction. Despite my disclaimer, the client was incredibly grateful and praised LAF's work. As she left our meeting she said, "I know this may not work, but I am so happy someone finally listened to me. That's all I wanted: someone to hear my voice." At that moment, I realized that legal aid is not simply about winning cases for the poor; rather, it is about restoring dignity to people who feel they have lost theirs.

Another eviction case involved a woman and her handicapped child. The landlord was seeking to evict

the family after the child had an altercation with another tenant in the building. A LAF team saved the family from eviction by negotiating a settlement with the landlord. Soon after the agreement was signed, however, the landlord sought eviction again. I met with and spoke to the family, and helped them write affidavits, in which they testified that they had done their best to comply with the terms of the agreement. Among other tasks in the case, I also drafted deposition questions and discovery requests. Despite our hard work, the landlord refused to settle and the case went to trial. Things looked dim for our client and her family, who had no other place to go. Then, just last week, a judge found for our client and refused to issue an eviction order. Besides teaching me technical skills, this experience also taught me the importance of perseverance. After thinking all summer about how our justice system could better serve the poor, I was thrilled to see that in this case, our system worked.

I cannot thank EJA and its sponsors enough for their generous funding of my summer internship. Without EJA's support, I would not have been able to have such transformative experiences. I entered my first year of law school with some interest in public interest work. Now, after my summer internship funded by EJA, I will enter my second year committed to it.

Thank you again.

Sincerely,

Clare Diegel

JD/LLM-International Human Rights, Northwestern University School of Law, 2013