

August 29, 2014

Mr. Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
13540 East Boundary Road  
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

First, I would like to extend my most sincere appreciation to the opportunity given to me this Summer 2014; I was one of the few chosen student to intern at the Legal Aid Justice Center Richmond/Petersburg. This experience taught me the importance of public interest awareness and woke me up to the many injustices forced upon some. I was part of a team committed with social justice and legal access equality and that, more than any other experience during the internship, taught me what is the real meaning of the word *advocate*.

This Summer, as we were told, was different from other LAJC internships in the past in that we were allowed to assist all the attorneys in the office in all the different matters each is responsible of. This allowed for acquiring experience in areas of the law that we had no knowledge of.

I was able to sit with Pat Levy during several unemployment and wages interviews as well as do some case law and legislation research for some of his ongoing cases. And, with the Just Children Program, I helped Nicole Dooley with an ADA possible non-compliance in an elementary school, a school board review for a student that was distributing drugs in school and a review of special education program for a child with learning disabilities; I was also able to help Jeree Thomas with the case of a minor in JDD that was seeking a review of his case. Marcel Slag gave all the interns the opportunity to interview several clients in housing cases (mostly against the Richmond Redevelopment Housing Authority).

I had the opportunity to help several Spanish speaking clients and was very happy to translate documents or to prepare letters in Spanish for the attorneys. I was able to see how much they really care about helping these people but sometimes the language barrier gets in between adequate communication.

This is why, family law attorney, Lisa Bennett requested my help with a very special and quite sad case. The issue was the upcoming review by the school of a child's special learning accommodations as well as the discussion of several other worrying issues with the child: she was doing bad in school, abusing social media by contacting unknown people and joining groups with suicidal content, posted sexually suggestive pictures on her social media outlets, constantly threatened with suicide, had questionable relationships with several boys with no supervision of her mother and had some mental health problem that required the deep evaluation of a psychiatrist. Her mother did not seem to understand the gravity of the many issues with the future of her daughter and, thinking it might be a language barrier situation, I was called in to translate simultaneously during the meeting with mother and child; it quickly became obvious

that her mother simply did not understand how to handle the situation and her child; the language was not the problem in the case.

This case deeply shocked me because, until now, I had never seen a situation in which a child so young, merely 13 years old, was already so misguided and lost. After our meeting I wrote several letters to the mother with instructions on which important dates she should keep in mind concerning the school board, psychologist and therapy appointments as well as reminding her of the severity of the situation.

Another attorney I worked closely with was Phil Storey. Mr. Storey deals primarily with Spanish speakers. I sat in several of his client meeting and followed the development of his cases by keeping track of his client's situation after receiving his advice. Most of these cases were concerning housing issues and I was able to get involved in the situation with the Trailer Park Rudd's and the code violation many of its residents, mostly Hispanics, are being served with by the city and that they cannot remedy due to lack of monetary resources to do so. This was one of the saddest cases I dealt with because it was not just the interest of one family but of several families that were facing homelessness.

On one occasion, however, a quite interesting case concerning a pair of refugees, mother and daughter, from Congo came seeking our help. They were seeking legal help, but of what kind? It remains unknown; we spent many hours, for several days, using the aid of Swahili interpreters over the phone, trying to understand how we could help them but in the end it remained unclear what their legal problem was. Their refusal in providing us with documentation sustaining their case or to grant authorization to contact the organization that granted them refuge in the United States did not help our slight suspicion that, maybe, they were trying to scam us when they repeatedly rejected the option of the mother applying and getting Social Security benefits (also offered by Catholic Charities): they only wanted "help from the Government or to go back to Congo". In the end we had no choice but to inform them we did not have enough information to be able to help them.

Overall, I had an unforgettable experience that will forever mark the way I perceive the law and social responsibility. As attorneys it is our job to protect individual's rights and fight for social equality and justice. This has inspired me to continue as a volunteer at the LAJC for the remaining year.

Thank you, once again, for the incredible opportunity.

Sincerely,

Edhilis Puerie  
University of Richmond  
T.C. Williams School of Law  
Juris Doctor Candidate 2016