

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

August 6, 2012

Dear Mr. Dan Ruben,

I applied to law school with the intention of working in the public sector and my passion remains unabated. This summer I participated in a 10 week full-time legal internship at The Family Center. TFC is a non-profit organization that provides legal services to families affected by serious illness. As their motto states, TFC “keeps families stronger, longer.” The legal department provides representation in housing matters, family court and employee benefits appeals.

The Family Center trained me to interact with clients largely on my own and I handled my own caseload involving matrimonial, guardianship, housing and lifetime planning issues. I visited courts in four of the five boroughs that make up New York City. For the majority of cases, I researched issues and drafted memoranda. On one case, however, I was given the opportunity to second seat a custody bench trial. This selection afforded me the opportunity to be involved in trial strategy decisions as well as to assist in assembling the trial binder, draft cross examinations and participate in witness preparation. Second seating the trial reinforced and validated my desire to work in the public sector and is an experience I will never forget.

The ten weeks I spent at the Family Center has added enormously to my legal foundation. Not only did my research and writing skills improve but I gained respect for the clients TFC serves and the attorneys dedicated to serving them.

Sincerely,

Elise Benninghofen  
Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law Class of 2013

**Adam J. Halper, Esq.**

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August 8, 2012

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America

*Re: Elise Benninghofen.*

Mr. Ruben,

I am the Director of Legal Services at The Family Center (TFC), a multidisciplinary legal and social services organization. I write to this letter on behalf of Elise Benninghofen, a Cardozo Law School student whom we had the privilege of hosting this summer

Since 1994, The Family Center has worked with individuals and families affected by illness, grief and loss. Our organization is dedicated to assisting some of New York City's most vulnerable and disenfranchised communities with quality legal, social and medical case management services. In our model of service, lawyers work hand-in-hand with social workers, case managers, medical personnel, and others not only to address the legal issue, but also to address the many psycho-social and economic issues that come with a diagnosis of serious illness.

This model of service means that our work with clients generally does not begin in the courts. Often, the place where our cases commence is in hospitals, hospices, local CBO's and in client's homes. Our referrals come from oncology and virology departments, home care agencies, welfare job centers and any institution you would expect to find people struggling with serious illness. We have formal and informal agreements with medical providers across the city and they refer clients to us for a host of legal issues including housing, government benefits, family and matrimonial law matters and trust and estates. TFC's Legal Services Department has a high volume of both transactional and litigation work. That work is conducted with clients in their living rooms and kitchens; we help them execute wills at their hospital beds, we are their advocates in courts across New York City.

So, this work is not for everyone. It poses challenges to intellect, but also to one's comfort. It is one thing to draft an advance directive. Executing it with a client, at their hospital bed, is another.

Elise came to us after having completed her second year. She had done her first summer at the office of the district attorney and was no stranger to legal cases which carried an emotional component. We expected good things from her. It is without reservation, that I can say that she exceeded all expectations. Elise is possessed of strong analytic, research and writing skills. She is a superb advocate for clients and had direct engagement with many during the summer. She is remarkably thoughtful and worked hard to address all matters before her – both large and small. An exhaustive list of her work this summer would be difficult to put together. Let me provide some highlights.

- Elise helped us to prepare for a bitter divorce trial. All issues are contested including child custody, support and even, grounds. These matters can be somewhat complex, but in this case, it was much more so because of our adversary is an unrepresented and remarkably unwell man who had abused his wife to a shocking degree. He is belligerent, threatening and manipulative to everyone involved in his divorce matter including his soon-to-be ex-wife, the Judge and our staff. Elise assisted the staff attorney in preparing the client's testimony, evidence entry and other matters connected to trial. On the day of the trial, she second-seated the attorney. Her work was excellent, timely and much-needed.
- Elise researched and provided staff attorneys with guidance on innumerable questions of law connected to jurisdiction, due process, tenant rights, succession rights, judge recusal, utility disputes, guardianship issues, evidence foundation, pleading rules and much more. Her research was excellent: her opinion on hard-to answer questions -- trusted.
- Elise drafted papers in connection to family, housing and lifetime planning matters and met with clients to discuss and execute the papers, if that was needed. She met with clients all over the city and spoke with them extensively about their cases, both to gather information as well as to take that information and use it constructively in the resolution of their issues. On more than one occasion, clients reported to me that Elise had done an excellent job on their behalf. It is not uncommon to hear from clients that they appreciated our work and staff and as a supervisor, I never get tired of hearing praise for staff. It is uncommon that the praise is so consistent and it was for Elise.

What everyone had to say about Elise and what I feel as well, is that she possesses maturity beyond her years. She actively listens, is articulate and responds with thoughtfulness and honesty. I and others have observed that Elise thinks before she speaks and says, plainly, when she does not know the answer to a question. This quality, that of self-knowledge, is a tremendous asset to clients whose trust she gained and will continue to do so after she becomes a member of the bar. She's authentic in her desire to be of assistance to others and wants to get her hands dirty in the messiness of fighting and resolving complex legal issues. This summer, she had the opportunity to do so for a vulnerable client population. Her assistance on their behalf was incalculable. Her assistance to my agency was tremendous.

As a final note, I've been doing this work for a while and I feel confident in saying that we all know the sacrifices in working in poverty law are many. Still, most of us choose to do it because working with people on intimate legal matters at a time when legal assistance is desperately needed -- is to be afforded the privilege of bearing witness. Even in dark moments, you never lose sight of that privilege. However, you can't do it without real assistance and the assistance provided by Equal Justice America, makes doing this work possible for interns at my agency. I know that I speak for Elise, our clients and The Family Center when I say thank you for helping to make this work possible.

Equal Justice America has the gratitude of my agency and its support. Thank you.

Sincerely,

S//:

Adam J. Halper  
Director of Legal Services