

August 31, 2013

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Thank you so much for awarding me an Equal Justice America Fellowship! I am extremely grateful for your organization's generous stipend, which made my incredible Fellowship experience possible.

Prior to law school, I was a teacher for four years. My first three years were spent in Oakland, California, where I was a member of the Teach for America Program. After three years in Oakland, I served as a volunteer English teacher in Quito, Ecuador. Both of these experiences inspired me to go to law school and to continue working for social justice. However, in true law student fashion, I continued to analyze my choice to attend law school. Will I directly impact my client's lives? Will I continue to work "in the trenches" as an attorney? Will law school really be worth the cost? After serving as the Family Law Extern at Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP), I can now answer all of these questions with a confident "yes".

When I arrived at NLSP, I had no idea what to expect. Older law students warned me that I would not receive meaningful, substantive work as a first year legal intern. However, I found my experience at NLSP to be precisely the opposite as I had expected. Under the supervision of experienced attorneys, I managed my own caseload, communicated and met frequently with clients, and wrote memorandas of law on behalf of indigent clients in D.C. In addition, I strengthened my litigation skills by writing direct and cross examination questions, editing pre-trial documents, and analyzing depositions to strengthen our client's case. I also improved my writing skills by drafting a variety of motions, including motions to modify child support, motions to modify child custody, and motions in limine.

One of the most rewarding assignments I received was working on a complex and long-standing third party custody dispute in the Domestic Relations Branch of the D.C. Superior Court. The case was difficult in many ways. First, the factual history of the case was unusually complex and the Parties had been fighting over custody of the minor child for over 10 years. Secondly, as a third party custody case, the legal framework under which the case was decided was much less certain than the traditional best-interests framework applied in custody matters between biological parents. Finally, the case was hotly contested and the opposing party presented a vigorous opposition to our client's position. The trial was set for 7 days, involved 4 parties, and initially had approximately 30 witnesses, including 3 experts set to testify.

As part of my assignment, I helped prep our client, the minor child's biological father, to testify at trial. Given our client's mental illness, prior substance abuse issues, and memory loss, it was imperative that he be adequately prepared to give testimony on direct and cross-examination. He had also previously been incarcerated and therefore, only recently developed a close relationship with his son. Despite these obstacles, our client had been making tremendous strides. He was in therapy, was compliant with his medication, and was free of all substances. The stakes in the case were extremely high. If we won, our

client could preserve his relationship with his son. If we lost, our client could lose all ability to remain a meaningful part of his son's life.

Our client was extremely disillusioned with the court system in general. He was very hesitant to testify, and there were major gaps in his testimony. Although our client's forgetfulness was attributable to his past substance abuse and memory loss, there was a risk he would not be seen as credible and that his past demons would be used to prove he was unfit to have custody of his son. Therefore, to prepare for trial, I used the events our client did remember to spur him to remember the others crucial to our case.

I also carefully analyzed prior transcripts for impeachment material. I summarized these findings into usable pieces of information. My supervising attorney used this information to craft a thorough cross-examination that ultimately destroyed the opposing party's credibility. His cross-examination was so effective that it featured prominently in the Judge's 27-page findings of fact and conclusions of law.

Helping to win our client's case was one of the highlights of my summer. Our client was thrilled to have the long-standing dispute resolved once and for all and to be able to finally focus all of his energy on his young son. Furthermore, I was excited to play a small role in helping him remain a part of his son's life. Without the legal help of Neighborhood Legal Services, our client would not have stood a chance in court. Not only was the opposing party exponentially more legally savvy, but he had great financial means and was able to hire the best possible lawyers to present his case. Therefore, winning the case was not only a victory for our client, but for low income, underserved clients everywhere. The case was also a testament to the hard work of the tenacious and resourceful attorneys at NLSP, who overcame tremendous odds to win the case.

I will cherish my summer at NLSP for years to come. I am extremely grateful to be the recipient of an EJA Fellowship, which made this wonderful experience possible. Thank you so much again for your generosity and kindness!

Sincerely,

Emily Ittner
Catholic University