

August 20, 2008

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am writing to thank you for the generosity of Equal Justice America in awarding me a Law Student Fellowship, making it possible for me to work in the Domestic Violence practice at Bay Area Legal Aid (BayLegal) in San Mateo, California this past summer. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to spend my summer aiding an underserved population in great need, and am now more secure than ever before in my decision to dedicate my legal career to the public interest.

When I began my internship at BayLegal, I had only a glimmer of an idea of what it would be like to work with domestic violence survivors, and my friends all looked wary when I explained what I would be doing. I was assigned to work two days a week at the Domestic Violence Restraining Order (DVRO) clinic, where I would help walk-in applicants file for ex parte relief. The other three days of the week would be spent working with my supervising attorney to represent mostly monolingual Spanish-speaking clients in family law and immigration cases. I was particularly excited to experience a broad range of aspects of the practice, from client contact and interviewing skills to courtroom hearings and litigation work. In these aspects BayLegal surpassed my expectations. I had the opportunity to attend several hearings, and prepare orders after hearing, stipulations and subpoenas. I wrote declarations for child custody disputes, and was able to prepare a full U-Visa application from start to finish.

However, of all the experience I gained, I learned the most from my contact with clients and DVRO applicants. Like all the other interns, I received substantive training in the issues I would face during the summer, as well as intake and client interview advice, but I was still mentally unprepared for the DVRO clinic and the problems our applicants faced.

Applicants at the clinic could come to us at 9:00 in the morning, walk through the several forms necessary to request a temporary DVRO, have us file their application at noon and come back at 4:30 in the afternoon with a response from the judge. For a legal procedure, this was shockingly fast—but after what many of these people had been through, nothing was fast enough. Some applicants cried as soon as they stepped up to the window to ask for help, but to me, all of the applicants looked extremely brave. It was appalling to hear what some of them had suffered, incredible to see their faces at 4:30pm when I told them their application was granted and they had successfully taken a major step away from an abusive relationship. Some cried again, this time in relief, and many said they felt like they had their lives back. I felt honored to be able to do this work for these applicants, some of the most vulnerable people in the community.

But as I worked with applicant after applicant, I began to realize that, however much courage and effort it must have taken to come to us to ask for help, it often took even more to actually leave an abusive relationship. At first, I was shocked at how many clients' stories involved a prior DVRO, which the apologetic abuser convinced the victim to drop. I was amazed at how many

occasions of abuse, and how much injury, an applicant could suffer without recognizing a continuing problem that would not end. These people were victimized by the person most intimately close to them, and it was very difficult to extricate themselves from the situation.

Initially, these cases made me confused and appalled. Having never suffered abuse myself, at first I could not understand how trapped many of the applicants felt. In the full-representation office, I was assigned to work on a U-Visa application and divorce for a 20-year old undocumented immigrant from Mexico, Sara (not her real name). Sara was 20 and seemed younger, a petite, quiet girl with a shy demeanor. She had been beaten by her husband while pregnant, and most recently had had her head slammed against a brick wall. I looked over her case, which seemed strong, and attended her DVRO hearing, where a pro bono attorney was representing her. But at the hearing, Sara told me that she wasn't sure about the divorce anymore, and had asked her attorney to request a less stringent restraining order. Sara's husband had pleaded with her and promised to change, and she wanted to give him another chance.

I was overwhelmed with frustration. I had seen many applicants in the DVRO clinic who had trusted their abusers to change, only to be hurt again. I had read Sara's file, and knew that this was not the first time her husband had abused her. Worse, I knew that Sara's U-Visa application, through which she could request legal immigration status if she certifiably aided law enforcement in the investigation and prosecution of the crime, would be jeopardized if she reconciled with her husband and wanted to protect him.

However, rather than unleash upon Sara with all of my concerns, after advice from supportive office staff and my supervising attorney, I spoke with Sara as an advocate. I explained the legal situation, what her options were, and what their consequences would be. In the end, Sara told me she still wasn't sure. She didn't want to proceed with the divorce or U-Visa. But she took my card and agreed to contact us if she changed her mind or if something else happened. As I watched her leave the office, I was fearful that she would be abused again, or that her child might be in danger in the future. It was difficult to imagine that letting Sara go back to her abusive husband was in her "best interest." Nevertheless, I knew we had done the right thing: if Sara wasn't ready to leave her husband, a DVRO and a divorce couldn't force her to do so. Sara knew, at least, that when she was ready for legal help, we were there to help her.

My summer work at Bay Area Legal Aid was invaluable. I learned more than just the substantive law, the courtroom procedure, and how to interact with clients in cross-cultural contexts. I learned a vital lesson for a young public interest attorney: a legal advocate is worthless if she fails to serve the client. Thanks to Equal Justice America for making this opportunity possible.

Sincerely,

Jenna Grambort  
UC Berkeley School of Law, Class of 2010