

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America

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Dear Mr. Ruben,

I write this to share with you my observations regarding public interest law based on my experience at Neighborhood Legal Services in Ithaca, New York. At NLS, I had the opportunity to work on both housing issues for homeless clients and on Social Security cases for mentally ill clients. I discovered that what makes this job wonderful is the sense of satisfaction from actually making life fairer in some small way. People always say that life is not fair. It's true that life is not fair when humans are not actively working to make it fairer. Life is whatever people are making it at this particular moment in history. If a group of self-interested individuals are running society for their own benefit and walking all over the rest of us in the process, then life is exceedingly unfair. If there are people working for the benefit of the elderly, the mentally ill, the poor, and indigent criminals, then life becomes fairer because of the efforts of those people. To say equal justice works is to say that equal justice works because we make it work. It is our job to soften the harsh blows of fate upon the faces of the voiceless members of our society.

I would like to point out two attitudes that can make us lose spirit at our jobs. The first is being too focused on the results of our actions. We can't beat ourselves up when a client sabotages herself as our clients sometimes do. We cannot say that life has not become fairer for our clients just because they have not achieved the exact result that they wish to achieve. We must zealously advocate for our clients to the best of our ability and try not to worry too much about the results. This takes discipline and a strong spirit. Too often, even winning in public interest law is bittersweet.

The second comes out of the motivations that many of us have for doing public interest work in the first place. We love to see happy clients whose lives have been made better through our effort. However, our clients often are disabled and part of their disability is being unable to express appreciation. We cannot allow a client who has criticized our best effort or told us they need a "real lawyer" to allow us to feel down. We must look to our clients with eyes of understanding and offer them the very best that we can.

This is not to say that I felt that my clients were ungrateful. Most were very appreciative. It made me feel so wonderful to be praised by one of my elderly clients after managing to get a behemoth corporate Internet provider to finally close her account. I also received praise from an elderly gentleman whose bank account I managed to get unfrozen so that he could have access to desperately needed funds. Their generation of Americans can make you feel just grand when they offer you their praises.

As the song by the Belgian singer Jacques Brel goes:

“The elderly live in a world that is very small.

They go from the bed to the window,

Then from the bed to the sofa,

Then from the bed to the bed...”

We must act as the bridge that spans from their small world to the larger, potentially dangerous world which continues to threaten them even in their last and most precious years. As more and more Americans grow older without health care, without a support network, and without anyone to advocate on their behalf, we are needed more and more.

So, in closing, I wish to express my boundless gratitude to those at Equal Justice America who made it possible for me to have the wonderful experience that I did this summer. I am grateful to the Law Students in Action coordinators, Beth Kingsbury, Victoria King, and Natalie Pincus who provided us with great substantive training. I am grateful to attorneys and paralegals Gregg Thomas, Alicia Plotkin, Betsy Wohl, Diane Campbell, and Terry Koniz at my office. They made my experience so fruitful with their guidance. I would also like to thank the other interns Katie Kokkelenberg and Nicole Pence and the Americorps paralegals Alexis Heath and Sonya Marie Diaz who supported and assisted me throughout my internship.

It is with a heart filled with gratitude that I return to my law studies at Cornell. I have both gratitude and the knowledge that I was empowered to make meaningful changes in the lives of my clients.

Very Truly Yours,

John Busby