



LAW OFFICE OF
TEXAS RIOGRANDE LEGAL AID, INC.
El Paso

September 30, 2009

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

Re: Equal Justice Fellowship

Dear Mr. Ruben,

The Equal Justice America (EJA) Fellowship re-affirmed my commitment to the legal profession. I entered law school in August 2008, and because of family circumstances, I did not fully immerse myself into the study of law. I lacked focus, and as a result, during my first semester, my pre-law resolve to become a lawyer faded. By late January of my first year, my father passed and my professional ambitions fell. I had enough. I withdrew from law school and returned home.

In April, after a few months of seeking employment, a friend recommended that I volunteer with a local non-profit. I followed her advice and interviewed for an unpaid clerkship with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Inc. (TRLA) in El Paso. Since that interview, TRLA embraced me as an apprentice. After a few research projects, TRLA assigned a client, Irma.

The Housing Authority of the City of El Paso (HACEP) runs a public benefits program that subsidizes monthly rental payments. Section 8 often covers over 90% of a participant's rental and utility costs. Irma was a Section 8 participant and her landlord initiated an eviction suit against her; Irma was in danger of losing her Section 8 benefits and becoming homeless.

When I first met Irma, her eccentric, endearing character immediately connected me to her cause. I was more than just professionally and intellectually engaged, but my sense of empathy assumed control. In her late forties, Irma worked part-time for a nutritional supplement company. During the first half of that first meeting, Irma subtly attempted to sell. She wore a large picture of herself as a necklace. Thick fiberglass encased her photo, and thin, shoelace string suspended it from her neck. The picture captured a significantly larger Irma: "I was over 100 lbs. heavier then. Then, I started taking this stuff [she pulled a box from her bag] and lost the weight really quickly." With those words, and with that picture and casing, suspended by that string, I knew I would enjoy working on this case.

Irma's case required advocating along parallel processes. Her public benefits were in jeopardy as her landlord initiated a civil suit. I immediately contacted HACEP and submitted a request for appeal. Then, I met with the landlord and negotiated settlement so Irma could avoid an eviction. We negotiated for nearly a month, and I was forced to balance my client's needs and wishes against the landlord's stubborn demands. In the end, we helped Irma out of her home, documented the home's condition when she left, and avoided an eviction. I also represented Irma before a HACEP's appeals officer, and helped retain her Section 8 benefits.

Since Irma's case, I've worked with several clients on housing and family matters. I also spent the majority of my summer researching and co-authoring an appellate brief on a discrimination claim against a local school district. Here, under close mentorship, I helped devise the brief's legal argument. We submitted the brief to the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals in Texas last month.

At TRLA, I've worked directly with clients, negotiated with opposing parties, and engaged in serious research and writing. My work stimulated and challenged me intellectually, as it re-invigorated my sense of empathy. When I left school and lost my father, I fell into an enormous wave of anomie. Then, I confined my thoughts to my troubles. TRLA saved me. It asked me to think of others, then act on their behalf. I've since been reminded of my commitment to public service and the law.

Since this summer's end, TRLA hired me as a paid law clerk. I will work here until early November, a few months before I return to law school to complete my first year. I owe you a significant debt, Mr. Ruben. Without the EJA Fellowship, I may not have continued my work here at TRLA these past few months. As a result of your generosity and clear dedication to serve historically disenfranchised groups, I will return to law school a recovered individual, no longer confined to my troubles; and I'll resume reinvigorated in my professional and personal ambitions. I learned more this year than I could have possibly learned in law school. For that and so much more, thank you.

Always,

Jose A. Medina
Law Clerk
New York University School of Law
J.D. Candidate, 2012