

November 7, 2009

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director, Equal Justice America  
Building II-Suite 204  
13450 East Boundary Road  
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thanks to the generous financial support of Equal Justice America, I was able to work this summer at Southeast Louisiana Legal Services in New Orleans, Louisiana. SLLS provides free civil legal services to indigent residents of New Orleans and its surrounding parishes. The office provides legal services in the areas of family law, housing, consumer protection, public benefits, and homelessness. I worked for the litigation director of the office, so my caseload came from a diversity of departments.

I worked to help one client keep his house safe from demolition. Our client's home had been severely damaged in Hurricane Katrina – the roof was torn off, the windows broken in. He applied for funds from the Road Home Program, a nationally funded but state-administered program that issues conditional grants for Louisiana homeowners to repair their homes post-Katrina. While waiting to receive these funds, our client started making repairs to bring his home up to code. After he made the repairs, but before he had received Road Home funds, the city in which he lived issued a default judgment to tear down his house, based on out of date evidence that his house was not up to code. I was proud to be able to write portions of the motion to nullify that default judgment. My pride could only rest in setting the client up for a strong appeal, unfortunately, as the judge presiding over the hearing had written the very legislation that enabled the city to tear down a house with a default judgment.

The varied work of the office presented me with many opportunities outside of the litigation department. I researched the restrictive covenants of property owned by a non-profit organization and met with the clients and our office's attorney to discuss my findings. I helped my office set up a presence at "Treme Under the Bridge," a monthly community marketplace, in order to advertise our services to those who need it. I also helped draft informational brochures on public benefits programs to be distributed to our clients.

I found the opportunity to work in legal services in New Orleans incredibly rewarding. The need for legal services for those who cannot afford them is high, especially in New Orleans, as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina continues to affect the area's poorest citizens. The office provided much needed guidance to people in helping them secure the services they were owed – whether it be from the government or from a contractor. Working from within the office, I was exposed to the practical constraints of providing such services. My only frustration with the work I did this summer was that our office could only handle so many cases, and could only work on those cases for so long.

I felt this tension very acutely when my class of interns got ready to go back to school. My boss, an Equal Justice Fellow, lamented about how much the lawyers would miss having us around. While she assured me that the office enjoyed our general company, the lawyers would miss the work we did more than anything. The problem, she said, is that while they were losing our helpful hands, the workload would stay the same.

I am very grateful to Equal Justice America for allowing me to help provide legal services to those who really need it.

Sincerely,  
Kate C. Lee  
Cornell Law School  
Class of 2011