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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Thank you very much for funding my internship at Break the Cycle this past summer with an Equal Justice America Summer Fellowship. Break the Cycle is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering youth to end dating and domestic violence through education and advocacy. As a result of your generosity, I had the opportunity to take an unpaid position at the public interest legal organization without worrying about my ability to pay my rent or support myself financially. I found the experience invaluable and remain committed to pursuing a legal career as a public interest attorney.

As a summer legal intern at Break the Cycle, I answered crisis calls and e-mails, offering both emotional support to victims who were fearful in their relationships as well as legal referrals to those who requested restraining orders against their partners. I was struck by the number of women with whom I spoke who did not understand that the controlling behavior and threats that they faced on a daily basis was abuse. It was hard to hear these girls – most women who called were under the age of 21 – blame themselves for their partners' behavior. Many of them received little support from friends and family who assumed that these girls were exaggerating and merely 'being dramatic.' Furthermore, at such a young age, many of these women felt social pressure to be in relationships or had internalized the belief that they could not function without a significant other. It was rewarding to speak with these girls, lend a supportive ear, and assure them that the fear or discomfort that they felt in their relationships was valid.

I was given the opportunity to both directly work with clients and engage in policy research and analysis. I aided two of the organization's clients as they underwent divorce proceedings that they had initiated as a result of abusive marriages. While I helping one woman understand the custody ramifications of her divorce judgment, I helped another woman, who spoke very little English, prepare her divorce paperwork for service on her husband. In the latter case, I had to understand the process clearly, myself, in order to properly explain in basic terms what the client had to do to properly serve her husband and why this process was important to follow. In

explaining the custody ramifications and service process to the respective women, I gained a greater understanding of the legal system myself.

I also had the chance to engage in research about the treatment of minor respondents who have violated protection orders imposed by other minors. Research regarding teen dating violence has typically focused on the victim's access to protection orders. However, little research has been conducted on the practical enforcement and penalties imposed on minors who violate dating violence protection orders. I conducted statutory research on several states and studied law review articles on the subject throughout the summer. I found that very few states have comprehensive laws that address both the safety of minor victims and the special needs of minor respondents. While few states allow minor petitioners to obtain protection orders, fewer allow protection orders to be obtained against minor respondents. Those states I found that allowed protection orders against minor respondents often did not specify the procedures and penalties required for the enforcement of the orders. With such ambiguity, it is not clear whether or not petitioners are adequately protected by restraining orders. Moreover, it is unclear whether minor abusers face adult criminal procedure or penalties for violating the order. Thus, while honing my legal research skills, I was able to discover an area of law in which much uncertainty exists.

I particularly appreciated Break the Cycle's efforts to help its interns understand the complexity of the phenomenon of teen dating and domestic violence. I watched the reactions of high school students as a Break the Cycle staff member taught them about the different types of abuse, the cycle of violence, and their legal options if they were in abusive relationships. I conducted research on the general, mental, and sexual health risks faced by teens in abusive relationships. The research was used in handouts that are given to teens who request information about teen dating violence. I visited a courthouse and saw the difficulty that many people had in coming to a consensus in their divorce and custody proceedings. One couple even fought over the official name of their teenage child. I was also invited to attend joint meetings throughout Los Angeles that my supervisor attended in order to address intersectional issues related to teen dating violence, such as issues specific to the queer community and women involved in gangs. By engaging in all these events, I learned about the greater social issues that must be considered in order for the legal protection granted by protection orders to be truly effective.

Overall, my experience at Break the Cycle opened my eyes to the intricate legal and social complexity of an issue that I had naively believed to be very narrow. To work with people as passionate as the Break the Cycle staff was truly wonderful. My experience confirmed my interest in the public interest work.

Thank you again for your generous grant.

Sincerely,

Kavita Ramakrishnan
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