

## KEANDRA BARLOW

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This summer I worked for the Michigan Law General Clinic as a student attorney, serving the civil legal needs of the poor. There are four supervising professors in the clinic, each with different expertise, which allowed me to gain exposure to a wide, diverse range of work. I dealt with a variety of legal issues, from breach of contract, to probate, to asylum. I was able to gain an immense amount of legal experience through making court appearances, attending pre-trial conferences, researching cases/legal issues, conducting interviews, and writing briefs, petitions, and memoranda. I think, however, the most valuable and enjoyable part of my experience this summer was the amount of client contact I had. The supervising professors ensured that the student attorneys were in charge of the cases, which meant working directly and closely with the clients.

One of the cases I spent the most time working on this summer was a probate case. My client's mother had passed away well over a year ago, leaving behind no will. As a result, the mother's property was to pass according to the state's laws of intestate succession. This left my client, her seven living siblings, and four additional heirs, with a property interest in the mother's home. With so many people involved, there is no wonder that there were competing opinions on what to do with the property. I very quickly realized how personal relationships can affect legal interests, as my client warned me before I contacted the other heirs that there would be strong opposition to her goals. I knew that I would first need to face the task of fully understanding what exactly those goals were. It would have been impossible for me to best serve her interests without grasping this, so our first conversation was a long, personal one.

I developed a rapport with her from that conversation, in which she became comfortable enough to talk to me openly about the family situation, why she had come to our clinic, and what it was that she was looking for. As my client had been living in the home and taking care of it since even before her mother's passing, she wanted nothing more than to have the home transferred to her name so that, as the owner, she could gain access to programs that would lower the property taxes, insurance, etc. Essentially, she was taking care of the home without help from anyone else and saw this as a way to make things more manageable. After I worked with her to come to the understanding that this was her sole intention, my next step was to find a way to convey her goals to the other heirs. In a purely objective reality, my client's goals were actually in the best interest of all the heirs; however, old rivalries, new tensions, and the grieving of the loss of a loved one left the parties involved with "blurred vision." With every heir's approval of the transfer, there would be no need to involve the probate court beyond the submission of paperwork, saving everyone time and money.

The issue was the complete lack of trust between the parties. Some of the heirs believed that my client's real intention was nothing more than to trick them into agreeing to transfer the home to her, so that she could subsequently make an end-run by selling the home and walking away with all of the money from the sale. It became my duty to contact the siblings, express unambiguously what my client's true intentions were, and explain why this would be best for everyone. I think speaking to the siblings in my capacity as a student attorney made them more willing to trust that the goal I expressed was the real goal. I also know that I was able to articulate the goal to them more clearly than my client could. She was incredibly grateful to me for working with her to figure out how to frame and communicate what she was looking for. By the end of the summer, we were able to bring some of the initially opposed siblings over to my client's side, but the incoming student attorneys will certainly have to continue working with the family to achieve the results we are seeking.

I chose to write about this particular client's case because it opened my eyes to the fact that many of these clients need us to be advocates for them in unconventional ways. I needed to be an advocate on her behalf not just to a probate court or to the legal system in some broader sense, but also to her own relatives who stand in objection to her goals. Advocacy comes in many different forms and I realized here how closely a client's personal life can be tied to his or her legal needs. This case along with the other 15 cases I worked on this summer gave me a new perspective on my responsibility to a client and how different legal needs require different attention. I am immensely grateful for Equal Justice America's funding of my 1L summer and could not have asked for a better learning experience. Thank you so much for this wonderful opportunity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "KeAndra Z. Barlow". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized initial "K" and "B".

KeAndra Z. Barlow  
J.D. Candidate, 2015  
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