

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

August 20th, 2010

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My name is Laura West, and I recently finished my full-time summer internship as a Law Clerk at the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles. Thanks to you and Equal Justice America, I was able to devote all of my time this summer to a crucial cause, and I'd like to share with you how much of a difference your organization helped us make in the lives of the many kids in the L.A. Dependency Court system.

When I arrived at Edmund D. Edelman Children's Court in Monterey Park, CA for my first day of training with the Children's Law Center, I knew almost nothing about Dependency Court. Besides the literature I read on the CLC website, and the few discussions I'd had with the attorney who interviewed me for the internship so many weeks prior, "dependency court" was a concept that I vaguely understood on some abstract level but could not begin to fully grasp on that first day. As I write this letter today, having successfully concluded my time at CLC, I am both sad to leave this nonprofit law firm that I've come to respect and hold in the highest esteem, and am yet completely inspired with the knowledge that the talented and dedicated attorneys I've met along the way will continue unabated in their worthy mission. It was in that first day when I learned just how important that mission is to countless children in Los Angeles county.

In 2009, there were 19,900 kids in the greater Los Angeles area that were legally considered dependents of the court. Many kids in dependency court are currently living in foster homes, others in transitional group homes, and some are being cared for by parents or relatives in the process of family reunification. Nearly every day that I worked with my wonderful advising attorney—since each law clerk was able to work directly and develop a relationship with a practicing CLC attorney—we walked the two floors down to our Court's department and handled the daily repertoire of ongoing cases. Tuesdays and Thursdays were our mornings to take on the cases of the newly detained children who happened to be assigned to our department that day. On average, we'd receive 2 to 4 new cases on each of these "pick-up" days.

Although it didn't dawn on me right away, as it probably hasn't yet dawned on you, these are significant numbers once you do the math, and they represent the many kids who are declared dependents of the court every day. While my attorney picked up cases twice per week, new cases came in every day including weekends, which means that the department of our courtroom had approximately 14 to 28 new assignments every week. Multiply these numbers by the fact that there are 21 courtroom departments within the entire six-floor building

of Edelman Children's Court, and you start to realize that approximately 294-588 children in L.A. County are removed from their homes to be placed into foster care every week—that's anywhere from 42-84 *new kids each day!* On sheer numbers alone, the forty or so student interns that come to work for CLC every summer are a priceless asset to the attorneys that represent these suddenly displaced children in need of legal advocacy.

Grants like the one I received from Equal Justice America are an indispensable part of this yearly influx of law students who volunteer their time to benefit the lives of the young clients of CLC. In my own experience, there are a multitude of ways in which the students, attorneys, investigators, and staff members of CLC make all the difference in the world to the lives of the children and youth who are affected by the foster care system. From the moment the Department of Children and Family Services enters the lives of our children, to that final day when the judge declares termination of jurisdiction over their court case, every member of that child's immediate family is assigned an attorney to represent his or her interests. Imagine being a child walking into dependency court for the first time. While every case is different, in the majority of situations, the past 24 hours of that child's life as been utter chaos: an often traumatic experience which has resulted in his sudden removal from the only home and family he's ever known, only to be followed by placement in a brand new house, surrounded by faces of strangers telling him the slew of brand new rules he must now learn to live by. By the time he arrives at court he's barely begun to understand his own situation, and as hundreds of other kids and families shuffle around him trying to fully grasp their own, in the back of his mind he never stops wondering where his parents are and whether he'll ever be able to see them again. It is at this point that an attorney comes downstairs to where he's being kept in “ShelterCare” to introduce herself before Court—and when this kind adult begins to explain that she actually *works for him*, he begins to feel just a little more more empowered...

Giving a child that's going through this difficult situation the opportunity to participate in the decisions that will affect their lives, is the most important, as well as rewarding, part of a career as minor's counsel in the dependency court system. Allow me once more to thank you for the chance to experience this profound realization first-hand, by working as a law clerk for the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles this summer.

Sincerely,

Laura A. West
Class of 2012
Pace University

August 17, 2010

Re: Laura West's Equal Justice Fellowship

Dear Equal Justice America,

I am writing because I was fortunate to be the supervising attorney for Laura West this summer and it was a tremendous benefit to me and to my clients. Laura came to our organization with a wonderful attitude and maintained it all summer long. Her commitment to the work and to our clients is admirable in anyone, but remarkable in a young woman who just completed her 1st year of law school. Her follow through and consistency is unparalleled.

Laura was polite, respectful and compassionate to all she encountered, be it our clients, the office staff, opposing counsel or service providers. She was extremely reliable and could be counted on to finish any task she was given competently and in a timely fashion. She spent time observing in the courtroom, having direct contact with clients, caretakers and social workers and also writing motions and referrals. She was willing to whatever was required to best serve our clients and always did so with a positive attitude and exemplary results.

I am thankful to have had Laura as an intern and look forward to seeing the attorney she will one day become. I have no doubt she will be a strong and committed advocate for her clients, no matter who they are. Her commitment to public interest law in particular and to excellence in all she does, is to be commended.

I thank Equal Justice America, on behalf of myself and my clients, for the opportunity to have worked with such an impressive intern.

Thank you,

Emily Freedman Esq.,

Children's Law Center of Los Angeles