

Dear Mr. Dan Ruben,

I am writing today to tell you a little bit about my internship at The Legal Aid Society Juvenile Rights Practice Group. The internship itself was primarily focused on advocating for the victims of abuse and neglect. Secondly, I was also given the opportunity to work with delinquency cases. I made a conscious choice to focus primarily on victims of abuse and neglect, as I hope to focus my career on this client population.

As a Legal Aid intern I spent my days doing client interviews, home visits, shadowing my mentor attorney Rachel Stier to court appearances, and doing research/writing. The best part of the internship for me was all of the client interaction. Law was no longer something I was reading about in books, but rather the consequences of legislation were playing out in front of my face.

On a base level, where and with whom our clients lived was determined by the outcome of our cases. On a more profound level, the concepts of nurture, development, and family were all at issue in the Bronx family courthouse. For me, this is what made the work rewarding. When I would be researching a legal issue, I felt connected and compelled to do my work on both an intellectual and an emotional level. For me, the motivation was often greater because I could picture the face of the child I was working for. "Legalese" no longer felt like such a foreign language when the framework resulted in working towards the goals of permanency or structure for a child, be it with a foster family or their biological family.

There were both good and bad days at legal aid. However, for all of the heart wrenching stories we heard and saw, we also saw some overwhelmingly positive outcomes. I remember one day translating for a boy who was being adopted by his foster family after seven years in the system. He had adjusted to his "new" family so well he pointed out that they were not his "adoptive" family, but simply his family. Other times I saw parents who had taken huge strides in drug treatment or other therapeutic programs have their children returned to them.

The exposure I had to delinquency proceedings was also moving. I worked under a phenomenal child advocate named Judith Harris. She gave me the opportunity to follow cases from intake through the remainder of my internship. I was not only able to translate with many of her clients; I was also able to sit in on a progression of court appearances. She even took me with her to a school suspension hearing. I learned so much from her about courtroom advocacy. Watching her do cross-examination on witnesses was like something out of a movie.

My internship with legal aid has only redoubled my conviction to do public interest work focused on child advocacy. There is obvious room for improvement in the New York child welfare system, and I want to be a part of that. I hope one day to work at a place like legal aid and, ultimately, to transition into policy work. I would like to create policy reforms that could facilitate a more child-centric child welfare system and/or implement programs that are preventative rather than reactionary.

Most importantly, I would like to thank you for the fellowship from Equal Justice America. The funding made a huge difference in my summer (from housing to lessening my loan burden!). I so greatly admire EJA's goal of strengthening law students' commitment to public interest work. The funding EJA provided allowed me to explore and strengthen my commitment to socially conscious legal work.

Thank you so much for your support.

Sincerely,

Melissa Friedman

Harvard