

October 2, 2009

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I think it's important for a recipient of the Equal Justice American grant to convey the importance of the award. I know that I am among a growing class of recipients of these public interest grants, and I maintain infinite thanks for the honor. Much credit is due to EJA for fulfilling a necessary gap in service to constituents who don't have many resources.

The biggest lesson I learned from my time at the Legal Aid Society is the equal value of all people regardless of their financial resources, in stark contrast to a society that too often dismisses folks because of it. I must say, though, that this isn't a lesson I needed to learn, because I have never been one to make negative judgment based on resources. In fact, it would be ironic because I see myself in them.

I see myself in one of my clients, an illiterate welfare recipient who was shuffled through the system and forgotten by many. At several stages, my client lost benefits and teetered on the brink of homelessness. Contrary to a stereotypical image of a welfare recipient, my client, even with limited education and earning ability, had only received public assistance for approximately two years prior to coming to Legal Aid. Without significant reading and writing ability, and with significant family abuse growing up, my client completed vocational school and maintained employment for decades. As with many people, however, my client fell upon hard times and began to rely on public benefits. In a panic, my client contacted Legal Aid so we could assist the client in maintaining and, if necessary, restore the benefits. We also wanted appropriate academic training. During my meetings, I got to know my client and felt empathy for the client's circumstances. I finally understood the idea that those without resources truly are forgotten, by and large.

I had the pleasure of accompanying the client to a welfare office where I experienced first hand the confusion of government bureaucracy. I consider myself to be fairly intelligent and I found myself failing to understand how my client was being sent back and forth to different "conciliation" meetings. Finally, I spoke on the client's behalf to get a clear picture of what was happening. Essentially, the client failed to understand several notices from the welfare agency and the final notice was a notice of intent to terminate benefits. Fortunately, one of my supervisors guided me through the bureaucratic makeup and methods to resolving my client's

issue. At the end of my tenure, the client's case was not resolved, but we successfully maintained the client's benefits. Interacting with the client was eye opening.

A second case I worked on involved a client who fell in arrears in a home that the client owned but did not live in. The client's elderly parent lived in the home and relied on her child to maintain the premises and provide basic amenities. The client fell upon hard times and the property fell into foreclosure. The client wanted to maintain the home, although they had not lived there for a few decades. The client had grown up there and the parent continued to reside in the home. I felt encouraged to assist because, if the American dream of home ownership is at stake, we must collectively act to save it.

The client sued an attorney-friend who offered up his secretary as someone who could buy the home, get a new mortgage and sell the home back to her. The transaction, although unique, seemed as if it would work. However, it fell apart, and the client alleged that the potential buyer forged the deed, took title, and impermissibly sold the home to a third party. I assisted my supervisor in drafting pattern jury instructions, and reviewing depositions for consistency.

In terms of policy reform, I did basic research into whether we could get to City to compel companies to accept public financial benefits such as foodstamps. Although this particular project was postponed, I am excited by the idea and intend to continue such policy work. It was perfect for me since I am so committed to public policy and public interest work.

All told, I thoroughly enjoyed my experience at Legal Aid. They do invaluable work, as do you, EJA. Thank you for your award. I count it, literally, as a highlight of my budding professional career.

Warm regards,

Nicholas E. Smith
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