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September 13, 2007

Mr. Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice of America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

For the Summer of 2007, I interned at Tompkins/Tioga Neighborhood Legal Services (TTNLS) in Ithaca, NY. While the office was comparatively small, the attorneys accepted a broad range of projects including, but not limited to, Social Security (Title II and Title XIV), disability advocacy, housing discrimination, landlord/tenant law, elder law, unemployment, and pro se divorce. When clients presented us with issues outside of our grant priorities, everyone in the office would go out of their way to refer the individual to an appropriate agency or pro bono attorney in the community.

As a rising 3L, I had only recently switched my legal focus from intellectual property to public interest. When I started the internship at TTNLS, I hoped that the experience would allow me to understand whether I was suited for public interest work and whether I would enjoy it. Thankfully, I was not disappointed. From the beginning, it was clear that I loved public interest work. Primarily, I was working on Social Security disability cases both at the Appeals Council level and the Administrative Law Judge Hearing level. I had a special interest in the mental health cases and there were quite a few that needed my attention. In those cases, I not only did initial intakes, but also continued cases that had been in our office over two years. As an intern, I wrote client letters, gathered medical evidence from health providers, and evaluated existing medical records for relevant evidence.

Because the disability cases for social security took years to get to the hearing level, I was also given a few projects that moved a bit faster. My first housing project was especially rewarding. Our client was referred by Tompkins Community Action (TCA) because the landlord had both overcharged rent for our client and had also charged excessive late fees. Initially, my client believed she had made overpayments totaling approximately \$600 over the past 6 months. The client had been told by her landlord that they only owed her \$400 and that they would not return the overpayment until the end of her lease. Because our client needed the money to put a deposit on a new apartment, their offer was unacceptable. After reviewing the landlord's contract with TCA (a section 8 agreement), it was clear that the landlord had raised the rent beyond what was agreed upon in the contract and thus the landlord could not legally continue to charge a rent higher than that stated in the lease and contract with TCA. My first action was to contact the landlord and find out their side of the story. The apartment manager sent over a copy of our client's ledger. From that ledger I discovered that neither the tenant nor the landlord were correct about the overpayment. When I redid the ledger accounting with the corrected late fees and rental charge per month, I discovered that the landlord actually

owed my client \$1900. After a series of negotiations with the landlord, the landlord finally paid my client \$1900 before the end of her lease. She was subsequently able to put a deposit down on a new Section 8 eligible apartment and move out of her old apartment on time. Both parties were treated equitably in the arrangement and in the end both parties received what they were due. My client was able to move herself and two young children to a nice apartment and the landlord did not have to incur any additional transaction fees, plus the tenant moved out of their apartment on time at the end of the lease.

The beauty of my experience is that I have a lot more great stories of success and advocacy. In the end, it was clear that I was meant for public interest work. I loved my clients, loved the day to day work, and felt intellectually stimulated by the legal issues. I am grateful for the opportunity to discover where I should practice law.

Sincerely,

Nicole S. Pence, Ph.D.  
Cornell Law School  
Class of 2008