

August 30, 2013

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am so grateful for the Equal Justice America fellowship that I received for Summer 2013. I had the opportunity to be a law clerk in the housing practice at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Inc. (TRLA) in their Austin, Texas office. I spent my summer working under the guidance of two supervising housing attorneys. Each attorney provided me with incredible hands-on experience, including client interviews, drafting pleadings, performing legal research and factual research, preparing for trial, and drafting a how-to guide for tenants to sue for repairs in Texas Justice court without an attorney.

One of the first cases I had opportunity to work on, I was able to see through from start to finish. Our client had come through one of the weekly clinics TRLA holds. She was being evicted by her landlord for non-payment of rent and her trial was only two days away. Her landlord had alleged that she had not paid rent, although she had offered the money a few days late and the office refused to accept her payment. Our client had recently changed jobs and because of a decrease in income, it was difficult for her to pay her portion of the rent. She had a federal housing voucher through the city which paid the majority of her rent, but she still needed to make a monthly rent payment. Her landlord alleged that she owed several hundred dollars in late fees and utilities, which cannot actually be collected in a forcible detainer suit. After doing some factual research on our client, I found that her landlord had not given notice to the housing authority that they were evicting her. Under federal regulations, in order to proceed with an eviction suit, a landlord must give notice to the housing authority. Under Texas law, in eviction cases in Justice Court for non-payment of rent, the defendant's representative in court does not have to be an attorney. Because of this law, my supervising attorney helped me to prepare to cross-examine our client at trial. My supervising attorney was able to get the case dismissed on notice before my chance to cross-examine, but it was still an incredible experience to have the opportunity to actually participate in court.

Another case I worked on was for a client whose housing voucher was being revoked because of criminal activity. Our client was arrested for assault, but the charge was later dismissed. After the housing authority hearing officer denied her request for voucher reinstatement, our office stepped in. We were able to get positive character statements from employers, neighbors and her landlord which we included with a demand letter to the housing authority, which I drafted. After receiving our letter, the housing authority reinstated our clients housing voucher. It is such an incredible feeling when you realize that you have just helped to keep someone from losing their home.

My clerkship this summer had an outstanding impact on my future legal career. I came to law school with the goal of working in public interest law, and this internship only strengthened my desire to do so. Legal services is one of the greatest ways that we can promote progress and advocate for justice in the legal field and I am so happy that I got to experience this first-hand this summer. Equal Justice America made it possible for me participate in this internship this summer and I am so grateful for this opportunity.

Sincerely,

Sascha Rips
Rutgers School of Law – Newark
Class of 2015