

August 21, 2017

To Dan Ruben, Executive Director at Equal Justice America:

I extend my sincerest thanks to you and Equal Justice America for awarding me this fellowship. My summer internship at Public Counsel was an incredibly edifying and uplifting experience that would not have been possible without your support.

For five years before law school, I worked as a 4th and 5th grade teacher in Atlanta Public Schools. Finding innovative and culturally responsible ways to bring quality education to underserved populations was something that brought me immense joy and staggering frustration. While I loved helping kids learn and achieve goals most would think unattainable, after five years, it became too difficult to watch students leave my classroom at the end of the year and travel deeper into a system designed to fail them. I came to UCLA School of Law so that I could equip myself with knowledge and resources to prepare myself to return to the South and come alongside community advocates already doing powerful work for communities of color.

Committing oneself to public interest work—especially in law school—is committing oneself to the understanding that most of the work one does during the summers will be unpaid. This can be challenging, especially in Los Angeles when the cost of living is crippling high and several peers accepting summer associate positions at large firms make upwards of \$40,000 for the same work. Your generous contribution to my educational experience this summer allowed me to have one of the most challenging and profoundly impactful summers of my life.

For ten weeks, I worked with Public Counsel on their Children's Rights Project. The attorney with which I worked was one of the most passionate and capable people I have ever met—the future of disability rights in the state of California is changed for the better because of his advocacy. This summer, I worked with Brian on several cases related to dependency children with disabilities. One of the more complicated cases I received in the first weeks of my internship was an adoption of four disabled children by their maternal aunt. These kids had been shuffled from foster parent to relative to group home after their parents' rights were terminated. Their aunt was an incredibly brave and selfless person to adopt four children under the age of 11 with complex needs and traumas; but on top of the stresses of adoption, she also had to reckon with the complicated web of adoption and foster care benefits, the belabored process of receiving services from one of California's regional centers, and getting the kids to and from one of their many doctor and psychiatric appointments without a car. Being able to serve her and make any process of her adoption and benefits inquiry easier was a privilege I will never forget.

I also assisted with data analysis and legal research related to language access inequities and funding disparities present in California regional centers. I wrote memorandums and compiled

statutory and regulatory law to provide to my supervising attorney so that he could testify in hearings before the California Senate on a disparity report he published recently. After having lived in the South for the last five years, I always looked to California as being one of the most progressive states in terms of disability and education reform—it was disheartening and empowering at once to learn that there is still much work to be done here in the arena of equitable access to services and benefits for our state’s most vulnerable populations. Working at Public Counsel afforded me a wide array of experiences and projects that allowed me perspective on an area of the law that I did not previously know much about but which impacts my area of interest—education policy—immensely. Seeing the day-to-day workings of a law firm as far-reaching as Public Counsel was instructive and rooted me further in my pursuit of a career in legal advocacy.

I am humbled and appreciative of the generosity of Equal Justice America. I truly thank you for contributing to my legal education and owe the tremendous opportunity to work at Public Counsel to the service you supply to law students seeking careers in Public Interest.

Chelsea Helena
UCLA School of Law, Class of 2019