

August 31, 2015

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you for helping me fund my fellowship with the Nationalities Service Center in Philadelphia this past summer. I had an incredible experience working alongside amazing attorneys to help underprivileged clients navigate the murky waters of immigration law. The fellowship served both as a great introduction to immigration law and an excellent opportunity to interact with clients from all walks of life.

One of my primary tasks as one of NSC's legal interns was to conduct client consults. We would have walk-in hours every Monday and Wednesday for potential clients seeking low-cost representation in their immigration issues. Many would travel for hours to reach our office, from as far as Harrisburg, Delaware, and New Jersey. Although we would usually take no more than six at a time, that number often rose if there was a large crowd in the waiting area. I would meet with the potential clients one-on-one, elicit and take notes on the information key to distilling the legal issues, scan any relevant documents, and present the cases at case review, which would take place every Friday. While I was usually assigned to interview those clients who only spoke Spanish, I also got called in to translate for a consult with a Russian-speaking Uzbek and was tapped to conduct a telephone interview in French with a potential asylum seeker from Algeria.

During case review, the NSC Legal Director, the staff attorneys, and the interns would brainstorm together on whether relief was available and what we could do to help the client. We would then either inform the client that she has no relief, refer her out to an organization that is better equipped to serve her needs, or assign her to one of our staff attorneys – and consequently to the intern designated to work with that staff attorney. While determining whom to take on was ultimately up to the Legal Director, the interns had a say in advocating for those of their interviewees whom they felt they really wanted to and were able to help. For instance, I advocated for bringing onboard a gay HIV-positive couple seeking status adjustment for the spouse who had entered the United States without documentation nearly thirteen years ago. I did a series of FOIA requests on the couple's behalf and corresponded with them until the end of my internship.

My other big task at NSC was to work on some of my supervising attorney's cases. As primary legal intern for Jonah Eaton, the staff attorney specializing in asylum

claims, I got to meet and hear the stories of asylum seekers, and research country conditions and human rights conditions in Liberia, Sudan, Honduras, and Jamaica. I took an affidavit from a gay rights activist who was persecuted in his home country for his advocacy work. I wrote the first draft of an asylum brief for a Sudanese man threatened, harassed, and beaten both for belonging to a certain tribe and for working for the UN peacekeepers. I will never forget his countenance as he sat in Jonah's office, patiently listening as the latter was giving him instructions for his asylum interview. The client did not speak a word, but his eyes were wells of sadness and his face was like that of wounded prey, permanently marked by the anguish of the torture to which he had been subjected on account of his ethnicity and political opinion. That face struck me even more than the scars that my gay activist client demonstrated to me while I was taking his affidavit. One of my greatest rewards this summer was seeing Jonah incorporate much of my asylum brief draft into his final submission to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) on the Sudanese client's behalf, receiving the news of an asylum grant, and seeing the client walk out of Jonah's office with a huge smile on his face.

When I wasn't working on asylum matters with Jonah, I helped him as well as other NSC staff attorneys with cases involving marriage petitions, petitions for visas for close relatives, Temporary Protected Status, Employment Authorization Documents, naturalization, and marriage/visa fraud. I drafted cover letters and filled out applications. I wrote an advocacy letter for a client whose second marriage-based adjustment petition was denied based on his first failed marriage, where the USCIS office director did not take full account of the facts and the BIA issued a ruling in our client's favor on appeal. I conducted legal research on visa fraud and marriage fraud, and wrote a memorandum analyzing another client's ability to adjust based on the current law and the state interest in family reunification. Finally, I translated from Spanish whenever translation was needed, mostly during interviews with victims of domestic violence and trafficking, and took the initiative to ask them questions that would address pertinent legal issues.

There were days when the frustrating slowness of the immigration process – as well as my gradually increasing awareness of problems such as femicide in Guatemala and Honduras, female genital mutilation by the Sande society in Liberia, and domestic abuse and extortion in much of South America – made it seem like the obstacles faced by our clients were so endemic as to be insurmountable. However, the act of chipping away at the iceberg case by case and helping individuals access a better life made it easier to keep working. Looking back, I am beyond grateful for having had the opportunity to contribute, if even a little, in this area, where so many people need all the help they can possibly get. Thank you again for aiding me in making this summer happen.

Sincerely,

Lidiya Petrova  
University of Michigan Law School  
Class of 2016