

May 17, 2017

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America Building II, Suite 204
13540 East Boundary Road Midlothian, VA 23112
(804) 651-1517
Dan@EqualJusticeAmerica.org

Re: EJA Fellowship 2016-2017

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Thank you for Equal Justice America's generous support of my public interest work as a Student Director of the Yale Law School's Temporary Restraining Order Project. With the backing of this fellowship, I was able to dedicate the time and care necessary to keep the TRO Project running smoothly and best serve its clients.

This year, the TRO Project continued to operate our office at the New Haven Courthouse to provide assistance and support to pro se temporary restraining order applicants. We served scores of TRO applicants, helping them navigate an often-confusing legal process. We met one-on-one with each applicant, listened to their stories, assisted them in completing the requisite court forms and affidavit, and provided them with a detailed overview of the entire TRO application process and protections—in addition to our follow-up communication with applicants after they leave our office. Our work helped alleviate the burden on applicants, who were often confronting one of the most challenging periods in their lives.

In my role as a director, I assisted in recruiting, training, and coordinating student-volunteers from the law school, who staffed our office in shifts for the full business week alongside the directors. I also orchestrated the fall and spring seminar component of the Project—offered in conjunction with New Haven Legal Assistance and the Yale Law School. The seminar provided interested volunteers with a forum for reflection and critical examination that built on their volunteer work; this curricular component formed a foundation for these student-volunteers' future advocacy in the field.

I enjoyed working with and supervising our body of student-volunteers, but I found myself most fulfilled by my interactions with applicants in our office. Working in direct services highlighted the human element of an otherwise-abstract legal system and brought home the weighty day-to-day burden shouldered by those who sought our help. Many of the clients who landed in our office had endured abuse, physical and emotional, for months or years before taking that final step to seek relief by way of the law. Often, verbal threats had turned physical, and occasional outbursts had grown slowly in frequency and severity. For some applicants, the introduction of a weapon to the situation was the final straw. For other, a threat against a child. Each applicant carried her own reasons and her own stories.

One woman walked into the office visibly shaken. She had been dating a man for over a decade. They had a young child. Things had gone well for them at first. He was affectionate, loving. He had a temper, but only directed his anger toward her on rare occasion. In the past year, though, that anger had become less rare. He was still the father of her child, and she still had complicated feelings for him, but she was scared. He had pushed her down the stairs. He had thrown her against walls. He had hit her and left her body bruised and swollen. She couldn't help but wonder: The next time, would he hurt her so badly she wouldn't recover? If not the next time, what about the time after that? Would he dare to hurt their child? She opened up about her concerns through fits of tears. She had never said it aloud before. Saying it aloud made it feel realer, she observed. She knew a TRO would be disruptive, but she was out of options. We talked—we talked for as long as it took to muster the confidence to proceed and to help her write her narrative for the judge. Her application was granted.

A different day, a very young woman knocked on our office door—a woman even younger than me. She had been living with an older man for about a year. They had dated for a month or two prior to the move-in, and he had seemed like a decent fit back then. But not long after they started living together, his behavior became volatile. He would yell and belittle her one day, and buy her a gift the next. He would hit her, and then apologize and say he loved her. She was confused emotionally, but even more than the emotional element, she was economically trapped. Her parents were not a part of her life, and her other relatives were not in a position to help. She had been looking for a job, but [couldn't] find one anywhere. She decided she wouldn't leave the man, unless things got really bad. And bad they got, the day before she came into our office. Her body was almost entirely covered in thick garments, but I could still see the bruises peeking through. She was ready to apply for a TRO—scared to leave the man's side, but even more afraid not to. We talked through the process together and the various kinds of relief she could request from the court. We filled out the court forms together and submitted her application. And she left the court building that day with an order. She visited our office again toward the end of day, just to comment that she could not imagine having to navigate the whole process on her own. She was grateful, and I was glad to play any small role in keeping her safe.

Thank you again for the support of Equal Justice America. You make our work possible.

Sincerely,

Danielle Feuer
Yale Law School
J.D. Candidate, 2018