



Summer 2018 EJA Fellow



Name: Isela Bañuelos

Law School: Columbia Law School

EJA Fellowship: Education Defense & Justice for Youth Services at the East Bay Community Law Center

Entry 1: Week of 6/11/2018 (posted on Facebook 6/12/18)

#EJAFellowUpdate Over the past few weeks I have worked with the East Bay Community Law Center providing direct legal services to families in the Bay Area. Humbled and thankful for the opportunity to integrate theory and practice. It has been rewarding to learn more about community lawyering and the role lawyers can play in making clients feel powerful not powerless.

Entry 2: Week of 6/25/2018 (posted on Facebook 6/26/18)

#EJAFellowUpdate I am very glad I decided to spend my summer working in direct legal services. Witnessing the degree to which youth of color are surveilled and systematically oppressed reminds me of the importance of providing direct legal representation.

Entry 3: Week of 7/9/2018 (posted on Twitter on 7/9/18)

#EJAFellowUpdate Grateful to witness community lawyering in action. While litigation remains an important vehicle to create change, partnerships between lawyers and community groups are also key to advancing justice.

Entry 4: Week of 7/23/2018 (posted on LinkedIn on 7/26/18)

#EJAFellowUpdate This summer, I am working at the East Bay Community Law Center providing direct legal services to young people caught at the intersection of the juvenile justice and education system. Over the last 9 weeks, I have been able to represent students facing school expulsions and informed families of the special education process. Fighting for the educational rights of students of color is integral to dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline.



August 13, 2018

Re: Equal Justice America
Letter of Recommendation for Isela Banuelos

To Whom It May Concern:

I write in enthusiastic support of Isela Banuelos for a fellowship from Equal Justice America. I am an attorney in the Education Defense and Justice for Youth Clinic and a Supervising Attorney at the East Bay Community Law Center (“EBCLC”), which is part of the clinical program at U.C. Berkeley Law School. I am also the supervisor for Isela’s summer internship. At EBCLC, we are very lucky to supervise many committed and bright students, and Isela stands out as one of the very best. I am confident that Isela possesses the necessary skills and qualities for a successful public interest career.

Isela’s Work at EBCLC

Isela was a law clerk in EBCLC’s Education Advocacy Clinic (“Clinic”) in the summer of 2018. The Clinic advocates for young people at the intersection of the juvenile justice and education systems in Alameda County. Clinic students represent clients in school expulsion, special education proceedings, enrollment issues and a variety of educational matters. In collaboration with the other civil practice areas at EBCLC, we also provide additional legal services to our clients in the areas of public benefits, housing, and immigration. Our mission is two-fold: to provide law students with the opportunity to develop outstanding legal skills and to provide high quality representation to our young clients.

Having supervised Isela in a variety of legal matters, I know her work well and have seen first hand her impressive legal advocacy skills. Isela excels in all her Clinic work. Over the course of three months, Isela represented a young client in a contentious expulsion hearing against a charter school, drafted a Uniform Complaint on behalf of another young person harassed by school police officers, assisted a client with a complex enrollment issue, reviewed special education records, helped gather data for two policy projects and met with multiple young people and families. Isela’s hearing was highly contested and involved extensive legal argument, as well as tactful case management. Isela’s oral arguments, as well as her preparation, were terrific. While some students would be intimidated when faced with these types contentious hearings, Isela was not: she rose to the occasion with complete confidence and finesse.

Isela’s ability to counsel and connect with the Clinic’s young clients is exceptional and perfectly embodies client-centered advocacy. In watching her with clients and their families, I am consistently impressed with her patience and tone – she is always respectful, honest, and



supportive. She is sensitive to the needs of her clients and understands the complexities of what they are going through. She takes as much time as needed to listen to her clients and answer all their questions. Clients, in turn, trust Isela and see her not just as their advocate, but as a source of support and reassurance.

Isela consistently draws meaningful connections between direct service work and larger systemic issues of race, gender, class, and education inequality. We teach our students how to be reflective advocates in the Clinic, but Isela has always understood and done this intuitively. This ability to simultaneously have both a micro and macro perspective of equity issues sets Isela apart from her peers. Isela frequently reflects on problems she sees in her cases and strategizes about ways to address them through creative advocacy. Isela also often reflects on how her own identity influences work, her relationship with her clients and how she is perceived by judges, clients, school administrators, and others. Rather than shy away from challenging topics, Isela always raises important questions that deserve careful thought. Isela consistently encourages healthy, thought-provoking conversations that benefit all her fellow clinic students and supervisors.

Isela is, in so many ways, an ideal clinic student. She takes initiative and works well independently, yet she knows when to ask for help. When Isela does ask for help, she comes prepared not just with her questions, but also proposed solutions. Because of Isela's maturity, ingenuity and general thoughtfulness, it is easy to forget she is a law student.

Isela's Qualifications for the Equal Justice America Fellowship

Isela's experience at EBCLC, combined with her long-standing interest in criminal justice reform, education, immigration and equity, demonstrates her commitment to public interest law. Isela's future career is inspired by, and rooted in, her direct experience working on behalf of students facing punitive discipline in both the court and school system. She has seen first hand the devastating collateral consequences of poor policies. Isela worked on her school discipline case and observed all the ways that a more robust school discipline policy – including policies that govern restorative justice in schools – would have prevented further escalation. It is the stories of Isela's clients that inspire her and will inform her work.

Isela is someone who makes things happen. At EBCLC, I see firsthand Isela's ability to make a plan and follow through, as well as her ability to hold others accountable. Advocating for students in special education and in school discipline proceedings requires a certain amount of cajoling bureaucrats and walking a fine line between being pushy and polite to get what you need for a client. In various proceedings and meetings with administrators, opposing counsel and others, Isela always holds her own while also being appropriately respectful so that she gets what she needs for her clients.

Isela's advocacy style always strikes the perfect balance between being conciliatory and collaborative whenever possible, while never ceasing to be a zealous advocate for her client.



As her resume makes clear, Isela's commitment to racial justice and equity issues is long-standing. Isela came to law school to become a social justice lawyer and she has done just that and more. In her course selection and internships, Isela has always taken advantage of every opportunity to learn as much as she can about education, youth law, and advocacy. This expertise will also serve her well in her career.

Finally, and perhaps most important, Isela is passionate and driven to do this work. Although representing youth in school discipline hearings is very intense, and at times discouraging, Isela remains unflappable. She appreciates the high stakes for her clients, but is always calm and level-headed. She maintains perspective and has a good sense of humor -- key attributes for a lawyer and a colleague. Isela is a pleasure to work with and will be an asset to any office she joins.

In sum, Isela has it all: she is smart, hardworking, can get things done and perhaps most important, she approaches this work with a great deal of humility. I know we will see great things from Isela. It has been such a pleasure supervising Isela. I would be happy to answer any further questions that you may have about her.

Sincerely,

Fanna Gamal
Supervising Attorney and Clinical Instructor
East Bay Community Law Center