



Summer 2019 EJA Fellow:



Name: Theodore Gelderman

Law School: Loyola Law School

Fellowship: Equip for Equality

Entry 1: Getting Started 6/6/19

The first two weeks have been a whirlwind. Equip For Equality has an extensive training that lasts for five days and includes everything from a crash course in special ed law to a live client intake. The first two cases I have assisted with have been unforgettable. My first case involved helping a mother get her child placed into the appropriate grade. Her daughter had been adopted from China after she had been abandoned by her parents due to China's One Child Rule. The adoptive mother did not know her correct age and the adoption agency had vastly overestimated it. Equip for Equality was able to both coach the mother on how to proceed with her school as well as refer her to the right resources and individuals to legally correct her birth date so that she can enroll in an appropriate grade level. The second case involved helping a family re-enroll their daughter who had been out of school for over a year due to an unhealthy school environment. I was able to coach the family about the best strategies to reintegrate into the student's high school. I have been overwhelmed at how much there is to learn - both about special education law, but also the inner-workings of the program, but I am starting to understand how everything works.

My work here will be a mix of doing intakes from the Equip for Equality Helpline (312-341-0022) for both English and Spanish speaking families as well as attending IEP, MDR, and hearing meetings to support families. My Spanish was definitely rusty on my first intake call, but it's coming back quickly, and hopefully will continue to improve. After sitting in on my first IEP with a somewhat hostile administration, it became clear how important it is to have high quality legal representation when advocating for your child/student.

Not that I have much down time, but when I do, I have been able to reflect about how fortunate I have been throughout my educational history. Working with students with disabilities and learning more about the daily challenges they face, and the general lack of resources and information, has made me both grateful for my experience and has underscored the importance of the work done by Equip For Equality. I am grateful to both



Equip and EJA for the opportunity to serve with this organization. While I still do not know specifically what type of law I hope to practice, my limited exposure to disability law has been exciting and fascinating.

Entry 2: 6/21/19

Getting the swing of things. While I still recognize that I have SO much more to learn, I have mastered the in's and out's of my role this summer. I know what questions to ask, and when I need help, but I feel more confident in my skills and am able to use what I have already learned. I continue to be impressed by my co-workers and the mission of Equip for Equality. Because I speak (or at least can sort of speak) Spanish, I have been doing a lot of work in Spanish, which has been both difficult and exciting. It has also exposed me to individuals who face compounded obstacles: not only does someone in their family have a disability, but they are attempted to get support by interacting with a system in a different language, often in poverty, and frequently with one or more family members who are undocumented.

Recently, I have been working on two due process hearings. Each student wants to attend a certain type of school that is less restrictive than where the school district wants to place them. One student is fighting to return to her general education high school and another student is trying to prevent a school from removing him. For both students, it seems completely clear to me that they could both thrive in the less restrictive educational settings, but the school districts are resisting. And, once again, these experiences have highlighted how important the work of Equip for Equality is. Families would have no representation and no support as they negotiate the future of their child's education. I again find myself grateful for both the opportunities and support that I have had throughout my life, but also for the great work that the folks at EFE have been doing for 40 years!

Having the right educational supports is necessary for all students to learn and thrive. Unfortunately, what a child needs to learn is not automatically provided, and there are forces that are often motivated by forces other than what is best for the student.

Entry 3: 7/11/19

I am feeling more confident about the language of special education. I still have lots to learn, but it is good to reflect about how much I have already learned. I started this position with virtually no understanding of the laws governing special education or how lawyers craft their arguments to support their clients. I am still frustrated by the level of discourse between some of the officials at the meetings I have attended. I had a professor 1L year who told me the #1 Rule when you practice law is: DON'T BE A JERK. I am now seeing how important that principal is. Many of the individuals who attend meetings to discuss the best educational plan or interventions for a child with disabilities do not have the best interest of the child at the forefront of their minds. Instead, they seem to be there to bicker and squabble and air their grievances. This has, and not for



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

LEGAL SERVICES FELLOWSHIPS

the first time, made me extra grateful to be working at Equip. Here the attorneys put what is best for students first and that always becomes clear during the meetings I have attended.

I am hoping to continue to learn in my remaining weeks here, but it is hard to believe that I only have a few weeks left here at Equip. I hope to remain involved with Equip and other educational non-profits in the Chicago area.

Entry 4: 7/30/19

Winding down. I am wrapping up my 10th week at Equip and I am taking this week to reflect about my whole experience at the organization. In the past 10 weeks, I have had the opportunity to attend IEP meetings, a mediation hearing, participate in dozens of client intakes, and worked with outstanding attorneys and community. I am aware of how much I still have to learn, but it is important that I remember how far I have come since May.

I hope to remain involved with Equip for Equality in the future. A number of cases that I have worked on have not been resolved yet, and will likely not be resolved for a number of months. My hope is to be a part of the outcome of these cases. The work Equip does on behalf of individuals with disabilities is incredible, inspiring, and absolutely essential. They have passed local legislation that has impacted thousands of individuals, and they continue to fight so that all people have dignity in their jobs and lives.

I must end with a moment of gratitude for so many individuals. Thank you to all the staff at Equip for their wisdom and expertise, and for the opportunity to be a part of this organization. For more information about the great work at Equip, check out their website: EquipForEquality.org.