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Dan Ruben
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October 23, 2019

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to work at Philadelphia Legal Assistance this summer through your award of the EJA Fellow grant. The grant enabled me to represent ten clients at administrative hearings and advocate on behalf of seven clients through appellate briefs. In addition, the work provided me invaluable skills I will carry with me throughout my career.

This summer I worked at the Unemployment Compensation Unit, helping clients secure their unemployment compensation. Those who are fired for no fault of their own or who are compelled to quit are entitled to unemployment compensation for six months. These benefits serve as a lifeline until they can find their next job. For many of my clients getting these benefits was the difference between staying at home or getting evicted and sleeping in a church.

While my clients often desperately needed these benefits, these were not individuals trying to “game the system” or avoid work. The people I worked with were some of the hardest working people I have ever met. People who bent over backwards to make the best of difficult work situations that most people I know would not tolerate. These were people who gave everything to their jobs and wanted nothing more than to be gainfully employed.

Unfortunately, the system often works against them. The laws are inflexible, their stories are complicated, and their former employers are incentivized to present a misleading picture of what happened.

For example, my very first client, a security guard, was portrayed as a thief. He was given to me as an “impossible” case, a case I could not possibly mess up despite it being my first hearing, because no one believed he had a shot at winning in the first place. This was because my client was seen, on camera, taking money out of a charity jar, and was therefore fired for stealing.

In this case, I helped my client demonstrate how the jars were actually set up by the residents of the building as a competition, to see which floor could collect the most coins. Some of the residents had exchanged the coins with bills to gain a competitive advantage over other floors. My client had in fact

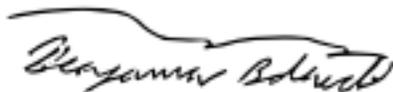
taken the bills out of the jar. But, as is also seen on camera, he had put coins back into the jars to replace the bills.

Part of what I had the opportunity to do, in this case and in others, was to put these misleading snapshots back into context, to show the administrative judge or board of review a fuller picture. My client had not been stealing – he had been innocently replacing bills with coins to help out with the competition. He knew there were people and cameras watching him. He had even donated some of his own money to the competition! But in an effort to avoid the taxes that unemployment compensation brings, his employer had painted him as a thief. All my client wanted to do was return to the place he had worked loyally and diligently for many years. He had loved his job, and without an income he had been evicted from his home.

Some clients were accused of job abandonment when their cars broke down and they simply had no money for public transportation to get to work; some when their health condition was so severe it prevented them from leaving their own home. Others were accused of insubordination when they were a day late in reporting the death of their fiancé, because they were grieving and making funeral arrangements. And yet others were accused, without any evidence, of helping clients switch companies. In all of these cases what we strived to do was to show that even the situations, which seemed pretty clear cut, were more nuanced than they initially appeared. That there was more to the story than met the eye.

To uncover the fuller picture of what happened in each case and present it in a clear and straightforward way, be it at a hearing or through an appellate brief, was not easy. It took countless client interviews, document reviews, subpoenas, hearing preparations, hours of legal research, and brief drafts. Learning how to represent clients at hearings required us to learn the rules of evidence and trial strategy, and both the hearings and brief writings took tremendous amounts of practice. It often got exhausting. But the opportunity to promote the truth and advocate for our clients to get the safety net they were entitled to was incredibly fulfilling. I am remarkably grateful to Equal Justice America, as well as my supervisors at Philadelphia Legal Assistance, for having made this opportunity possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Benjamin Bolnick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Benjamin Bolnick

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