



Summer 2020 EJA Fellow:



Name: Rebecca Machtinger

Law School: Duquesne School of Law

Organization: Juvenile Court Project

Entry 1: I am officially three weeks into my summer internship, and I can honestly say it has been anything but what I expected. I thought online law school was tough enough, but I was quickly corrected during my first online court hearing. I currently work for the Juvenile Court Project through the Allegheny County Bar Foundation representing indigent parents in dependency proceedings that range from shelter care hearings to adjudicatory hearings to termination of parental rights hearings. When I first got to law school, I had one “dream job” in sight: working in child advocacy. Yet somehow, I found myself on the complete opposite side of the argument. When I first told people about my job, they always asked how I got over representing these “child abusers.” While they are correct in that the work isn’t always glamorous, at the end of the day we are representing parents meeting their worst nightmare: the potential of losing their children. At the same time, children often are meeting their worst nightmare as well: losing their parents and their family. There is no handbook for parenting, and most admittedly are just doing their best, yet sometimes the law disagrees as to what that “best” may be measured as. While I thought the child’s side was the only one with any real sense of justice, my work has helped me to realize I’ve been misguided. Justice is when all parties can work together, communicate, and set reasonable goals so that a family can stay together and remain happy and healthy. Regardless of what “side” you are on, everyone in that courtroom is working together towards one common aspiration: giving a child a loving family and home.

While the formatting is unprecedented, I am still awed by the work I get to witness on a daily basis thanks to Equal Justice America and their support.

Entry 2: This past week at my internship I got to observe a hearing that expanded outside of the juvenile dependency realm, and instead delved into the intricacies of immigration. One of the ways to help a child receive their green card is by rendering them S.I.J.S., Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. While in order to be rendered a dependent child you must show that the child in question is without a ready, willing, and able parent, in order to meet S.I.J.S. you must also prove that the child suffered from abuse, neglect, or



abandonment. While most parents wouldn't dream of "admitting" that they had abused, neglected, or abandoned their children, many of the parents of these immigrant children are jumping at the chance to prove it. What a crazy thing to imagine being willing to risk not only your rights as a parent but willingly move your children to a different country all on their own in order to provide them a better life. Our client in particular was worried about gang violence against the family which prompted their relocation of the child to the states. While most parents here are fighting for their child's return, these parents are fighting for their children to stay away (for the sake of their safety) in a country where they often do not understand the language or the law. Even in a time of such darkness and sadness in our country, the opportunities available in America are still bright for those suffering in other nations.

Entry 3: As per the Adoption and Safe Families Act, the child welfare agency is required to file a petition for termination of parental rights once a child has remained in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months. While this legislation already is highly debatable, it is particularly interesting to consider today in the covid-19 world we live in. At this 15-month mark, if the conditions necessitating placement have not been remedied, the goal is no longer reunification with the parents but rather adoption. During the pandemic, for families in dependency court, this strict timer continued to run. However, for the safety of the caseworkers as well as the families, many of the services that are needed in order to help alleviate circumstances, such as addiction treatment services and therapy, were no longer operating. While meant to be in the best interest of the child, this timeline has ended up hurting families that are unable to get the help that they need, are asking for, or are even court ordered to participate in. Many of these times these families feel lost and hopeless. However, while the agency must file the petition, that does not mean the petition will necessarily be granted. Through the Juvenile Court Project, these parents are able to have representation at these termination and permanency hearings so that they can be adequately counseled and hopefully not become victims of the system.

Entry 4: I finished my time with the Juvenile Court Project about a week and a half ago. Over the course of my internship, I have developed such a sense of respect for the attorneys that work in this office. While every player in the dependency courtroom has an incredibly important job, it seemed as if the person with often the most pushback was our client: the parent. It was such a weird phenomenon to come up with "strategy" to convince a courtroom why a parent should have the rights to their own child. Often times, it was heartbreaking to watch. On the other hand, for the cases where the children were returned to the legal and physical custody of their parents and the case was closed, the joy was unparalleled. This was important work, beyond what I had originally imagined and anticipated. I will forever be thankful for the opportunity and thankful to the attorneys that do this heartbreaking work on a day to day basis.

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