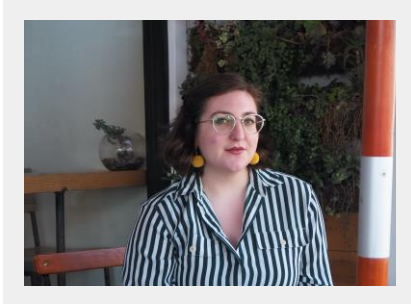




Summer 2020 EJA Fellow:



Name: Keaton Shapiro
Law School: George Washington University
Organization: Neighborhood Legal Services Program

Week of June 15th

The country, and really the world, has spent the last three weeks loudly fighting for justice and equality for Black people and called out the systems that need reform. I remain a part of that fight.

Reform, however, takes time, so in the meantime we must navigate the systems that are in place. Through my work at Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP) I am given the opportunity to learn how to navigate this system.

Working in the Brief Services Unit means being on the team that hears cases first, then provides advice or passes them on to one of our teams. In the two weeks I have been working at NLSP I have heard stories from people who need real help from the social security systems we have in place and who simply cannot help themselves due to a lack of resources, knowledge, or access. This is not the fault of the people, many of them have every document they're meant to have and have simply exhausted their abilities to self-advocate. In many of these cases, people have been denied assistance to which they are entitled because the agencies did not collect the information they were supposed to, lost some piece of paperwork, or just don't have the means to support everyone who needs it.

I feel truly honored to be given the opportunity to learn how to help these people, who are all low income and, due to systems that are being highlighted nationally, are primarily Black. I feel equally, if not more, lucky to be financially supported by Equal Justice America so that I can do this work in DC, which would be significantly less feasible otherwise.

My goal at NLSP and in life in general is to help as many people as possible. As I have said before, it is often financially infeasible to work in the non-profit, social justice, or legal services fields due to underfunding and student loan debt. If you are able and are looking for somewhere else to donate, please consider donating to EJA to fund future fellowships and help bring more people into the social justice and advocacy worlds. Together we can change things, but first we need to understand how it works in the first place.

Wishing you all strength and sanity during the most complicated of times.



Week of July 6th

As of this week I am over halfway through my internship with Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP), for which I am very lucky to be supported by my fellowship with Equal Justice America.

I began this internship on June 1, at the beginning of one of the biggest social justice and civil rights movements in history. The past five weeks have been a bit of a blur, but the thing that has stood out to me the most is the extent to which the systems in place are designed to be difficult. Housing, food, relationships with one's children -- these are all things many of us take for granted and, quite honestly, they are necessities we should be able to take for granted. When people find themselves in a situation where one or more of these rights are not available to them they are forced to turn to the state and go through complicated processes with little assistance.

I mention this movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, because the lack of access to basic human rights and necessities disproportionately affect POC and especially Black people. These are among the systems that we need to invest in fortifying. The systems that need attention so that those who rely on them are able to navigate them with more ease and have access to food, housing, etc. much more quickly. These are the systems that can be funded with the money made available by defunding the police.

Until these systems are overhauled, however, we have to learn to navigate. I am proud to work for an organization that helps people in need navigate a system designed to work against them. It remains to be seen whether or not I have the emotional fortitude to continue in legal services long term, but for now I will do what I can to help. The people who call NLSP are asking, simply, for help.

As I've said before, altruism is cost prohibitive so if you are able please consider supporting Equal Justice America and allowing them to fund summers for those who want to help.

Week of July 27th

As of today there are 7 (business) days left of my internship with Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP). As of Monday the eviction moratorium put in place by the CARES act has been lifted. Unfortunately, I will be leaving NLSP before the anticipated wave of eviction cases come in, but I will not forget how necessary this work is.

We live in a country that is structurally designed to keep the poor in poverty, to knock them down every time they start to get back up. This has always been the case, and many have been aware of this reality for decades. Now that federal unemployment rates are at an all time high, more people are starting to wake up and see the system for what it is.

Civil legal services, non-profits protecting undocumented immigrants, organizations working to get criminal records sealed, the list goes on... these are the organizations that help those who cannot go at it alone. These organizations are crucial as we continue to fight for revolution, because these are the organizations that protect those too vulnerable to fight. These are the organizations that help those who are too busy trying to live in this system, just trying to get by, to go to a protest or sign a petition.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

LEGAL SERVICES FELLOWSHIPS

As I have said in all of my update posts, I am being funded by a fellowship with Equal Justice America. EJA provides funding to law students working in the social justice field, trying to help the kinds of organizations I described above. Again, social justice work is cost prohibitive but crucial. Moreover, as has been made ever more clear by this pandemic, the people who see the injustice are often the people experiencing it, meaning many of the students interested in social justice work don't have the kind of financial support you may find among other law students. If you have the means, please consider donating to EJA to help fund future summer fellows who are happy to make the world a little better for free but shouldn't have to choose between fighting for human rights and paying their rent.

I hope you will consider donating, and thank you so so much to those who already have. I will post a final update in a little under 2 weeks, so if you want to donate but need to wait there will be one more opportunity.

Stay safe, stay strong, keep fighting.

Week of August 10th

It has now been a week since the end of my internship at Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP), which has given me time to reflect on the experience and what I can take from it. Working in Brief Services, which is the unit in which I interned, means hearing multiple stories every day of people trying to work within a system designed to fail them. I have said this before, but I repeat: it is important to know that the system doesn't work, but in order to create one that works we need to know why and how the system fails. I was lucky to have the opportunity to see those failures first hand from an outside perspective. I am privileged in that I have not had to rely on these systems in my life. Any of you who struggled with actually receiving unemployment benefits, which is many of you, have now seen a fraction of how intentionally confounding the system is.

I don't know where my personal career path will wind, but I do know that the knowledge I gained at NLSP will stick with me and fuel my passion for creating an equitable world, step by step.

Please consider donating to Equal Justice America to fund future internships so that more students have the opportunity both to learn the intricacies of the failures of these systems and to help those within them navigate the convolutions. The more knowledge we have, the more powerful we are. Thank you so much to those who have already donated.