

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer I had the privilege to work at the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles (CLCLA). Whenever there is an allegation of child abuse or neglect in Los Angeles County, then a case is opened in Children's Court to investigate the charges. CLCLA represents the children in such cases. Our clients range from newborns borne with drugs in their system, to twenty-one year olds who have been declared dependents of the court since at least age seventeen.

The wonderful thing about representing the child is that I can solely focus on what is in the child's best interest. In nearly 100% of the cases the child did nothing wrong and is before the court due to someone else's commissions or omissions. Even the rare times when a child has done something wrong it is usually in response to some trauma that was inflicted upon them. Being able to focus strictly on the child brought great clarity. There was no ambiguity in my task. I simply had to ask myself, "What is in this child's best interest?" Sometimes that would mean I was advocating for the child to return to his or her parents, but many times it would not.

Trying to explain to a child or even a teenager why they cannot return home with their parents can be heartbreaking. Naturally, the child believes it is their fault or something they've done, and that is the reason why they cannot return home. In reality the reasons they cannot return home is because of what their parents are or are not doing. Their parents are still using drugs or the parents are not going to the court ordered counseling. As a result of their parents' failures, the children are left in the system. Like anything else ran by the government, sometimes it works beautifully and sometimes it fails horribly. In either instance, many times the children are left with psychological and emotional scars that damage their interpersonal and social skills for life.

Working at CLCLA this summer allowed me to see the best of humanity. Despite the mess that parents put their children through, for the most part the children still wanted to go home with their parents. Regardless of what happened the children still loved their parents, they were still loyal to their parents and wanted to live with their parents, even if it meant being homeless along with their parents. Children have a seemingly infinite capacity to love and forgive. My heart would bleed for these children as I read the reports about child abuse and sexual molestation at the hands of their parents. Yet, when I would meet the children they would still have joy and love in their hearts. My clients are quite extraordinary. They are teaching me. If they can forgive and love their parents for the unforgivable, then certainly I can let go of and forgive the trifle actions of others. We can all stand to be as loving and forgiving as my clients.

There was great ethnic diversity among my clients, and education levels obtained by their parents. However, I did begin to see three trends among my clients as to how or why they ended up in children's court. One, a parent or caretaker recently died. Two, a parent or caretaker has been unemployed for an extended period of time. Three, one of their parents were a former dependent of the court. The mental and emotional triggers that are activated by death and long-term unemployment have the following similarities; there is great emotional distress, financial instability, a change in lifestyle, increase in anxiety and a pessimistic view of the future, or depression. One can understand how either situation may lead to abuse or neglect. Abuse or neglect is never justified, but one can understand why it occurred. In the third trend, the parent may have never seen what a stable or "normal" family looks like, and therefore they have no idea how to create, or maintain such a family. Also many dependents of the court become parents while they are still dependents themselves. This usually occurs due to a longing to have someone to love and to have someone love them back. The dependents mean well, but they do not have

the skill or upbringing to provide a healthy or safe living environment for their children. Since the dependents are still in the system, they are regularly seen by social workers, and therapists who are privy to see the dependent's short-comings as a parent. This leads to many dependent children having their children taken and placed either in the system or for adoption.

One of the highlights of my summer was being present the very first time an inmate got to meet his daughter. He's been incarcerated her entire young life. At Children's Court, the bailiff has teddy bears available to give to the children to make court a bit less scary. I gave the little girl a teddy bear and told her it was from her daddy. That was a very special moment to me, for reasons I do not understand. Other special moments include being able to grant my clients' wishes and send them back home with their parents because their parents have completed drug rehab and individual counseling.

One last special moment was helping a young lady fill out her FAFSA form to receive financial aid for college. This young lady has been in foster homes since she was ten years old, yet she managed to graduate high school, not only on time but with honors. As a child advocate this summer, I was able to become entrenched in the lives of my clients and help them in every aspect of their life. No matter what they needed, I was there to help them obtain it. Whether it was ensuring that they got into the classes that they needed, or making sure they received the money the court ordered they received to get haircuts. Whatever services they were entitled to, I fought to ensure that they received those services. I'm a lawyer, and fighting for people's rights is what I do. Thank you EJA, for giving me the opportunity to have this life altering experience.

Antonio Raymo
Santa Clara