

August 31, 2017

Dan Ruben, Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Building II, Suite 204
Midlothian, Virginia 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This internship experience at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Inc., (TRLA) further enhanced and solidified my skills set and allowed me to get comfortable in my role as a soon-to-be-attorney. During my internship, my supervisors gave me my own cases to work on and sent me off. While they were there to supervise me and review my pleadings, I was on my own. This experience gave me the opportunity to develop and enhance my own case management skills. I formulated weekly task lists, and I prioritized these tasks to stay on top of my caseload.

I divided my time working at the main TRLA office and at the Bexar County Family Justice Center (FJC). The FJC has partnered with TRLA for a special project focusing entirely on civil protective orders. I worked with the one TRLA attorney housed inside the FJC working on this project. While at the main office, I worked on custody, paternity, child support, and divorce cases. Almost all my cases involved domestic violence. However, on my FJC days, I worked entirely on protective order involving very serious violence and assaults.

While most of my time was spent drafting, researching, and preparing evidence for hearings, I also spent a great amount of time talking directly with current and potential clients. Once I explained to them that I am a law student, but will be working with the supervising attorney on the case, they began treating me as their attorney, confidant, and counselor. I had multiple phone conversations from panicked clients where I had to calm the client down and try and elicit coherent and factual details that were very important to the case. I had to prepare clients for trial and explain their legal cases to them in client-friendly terminology, something I noticed that many attorneys lose over time. One of my supervising attorneys explained everything to the client very quickly, using words like “preponderance of the evidence” and “predicate.” The client looked at me and said, “What? I don’t understand those words.” I had to explain more fully to her in lay person’s terms, something that took a little more time than the usual run-down the lawyer is used to giving. Further, I was present and assisted the paralegal in many of the initial interviews, where clients applying for a protective order would describe the violent incidents so the supervising attorney could determine whether to take the case. My counseling background helped in this area tremendously, as I was used to empathizing and speaking to emotional clients going through very difficult times in their lives.

While I worked on over 50 cases this summer, a few clients stood out to me. One client I helped in obtaining a protective order. I was assigned to her case from initial interview to final hearing. I offered her tissues during the initial interview when she had to describe the incidences of

violence, and I offered her a hug when her protective order was finalized. I talked her through the process of the hearing, I told her to take a deep breath, and I reminded her to give her testimony just like we practiced in the office the afternoon before. I felt wonderful after the hearing was over and she was granted her protective order.

On one of my cases, I worked with the San Antonio Police Department (SAPD) in subpoenaing records, preparing them to testify as witnesses, obtaining police reports and records, and searching the SAPD database to gather information on an adverse party's current incarceration or warrant status. While preparing the client for the protective order hearing, I had to go over the pictures we would be admitting into evidence with her. These pictures, official SAPD evidence, were taken after my client was horribly assaulted. I prepared her and told her it was probably going to be hard seeing the pictures, but that we had to work through it because the judge is going to want to see them. After some tears and a few moments of silence, the client smiled—something that took me completely off guard—and told me that this was a reminder of how far she had come, as the pictures were taken two months prior. She was so proud of her progress and independence, and I was reminded how hard it is for some victims of domestic violence to leave their abusers.

Finally, on the last day of my internship, I did my first hearing completely on my own. The case was a divorce and custody dispute with domestic violence. My client was very scared, but extremely ready to be divorced, as they had been separated for a very long time and the spouse was guilty of very cruel treatment to my client and their child. I thought to myself that I was more scared than her, since I knew it was not going to be an easy divorce prove-up—there were service issues and other kinks in my default. However, I stopped and shifted my focus off myself and onto my client, where the focus should always be. This was her life, her child, and her divorce; not mine. I realized then that this was one of the biggest days of her life, and my nervousness and fear paled in comparison to hers. I stumbled on my own, but finished strongly with only a couple minor hiccups. My client smiled and gave me a hand shake, a hug, and a big “Thank you.”

This internship affirmed my desire to work with victims of domestic violence in a non-profit environment. Seeing all the clients I helped, and knowing that they probably would not have been able to hire a private attorney, further sculpted my future path. This internship also allowed me to learn more about domestic violence, the dire need in my community, and what I could do to help these victims, aiding me in preparing my Equal Justice Works fellowship application, which I will be submitting in the next month. Thank you so much for this opportunity and for helping me fund this unpaid, rewarding, full-time internship.

Sincerely,

Stephanie R. Harlien
St. Mary's University School of Law
May 2018