

To: Dan Ruben, Executive Director, Equal Justice America Foundation
From: Kimberly M. Adams
Subject: Spring, 2010 Fellowship Experience with the Detroit Center for Family Advocacy
Date: June 17, 2010

Mr. Ruben,

I was fortunate enough to be chosen as an Equal Justice America Fellow for Spring, 2010. My fellowship placement was with the Detroit Center for Family Advocacy in Detroit MI. The center is sponsored by the University of Michigan Child Advocacy Clinic and its purpose is to assist parents involved in child welfare matters initiated by the Department of Children and Family Services.

My interest in parental representation was sparked by always experiencing people saying that child abuse, neglect, or child welfare issues in general are precipitated by bad parents, which are in turn bad people. Most of us have never experienced the trials and tribulations of having to raise children as a single parent, without support of family and other agencies, dealing with abusive behaviors, or in situations of poverty. These parents need a hand up, not a hand out. Some have made bad choices, some are placed in situations not of their own choosing and they need a voice to keep their family together if possible. Yes, there are times when immediate families may need to be split for a short time in order for the parent to attend rehabilitation or take care of matters to fix issues to keep their family intact, however, termination should not be the only alternative for parents that are involved in child protective service matters.

My work with the Detroit Center for Family Advocacy revolved around participating in client interviews, observing court proceedings, and drafting legal documentation for our clients. As an evening/part-time law student, it was a great experience to be involved in drafting legal documents that would actually be used to decide our clients' cases. One of the assignments I am most proud of is developing a Power of Attorney Fact sheet for DFCA Clients, which gives them basic information on how to draft their own power of attorney for child care matters. Many people, especially those not familiar with the legal system do not know the value of a power of attorney dealing with their children until AFTER something happens vs. having the document available for any circumstance.

One thing that law students and lawyers learn when working with parental representation issues, you have to know how to be a strong advocate for your client against the odds of society's impressions of "bad parents = bad people = termination of parental privileges". This area of the law not just involves legal advocacy but public education about issues that are not far "from home". One never knows what situation they may be in and could be involved with Child Protective Services for the minute of issues. Most people only "see" the most serious forms of child abuse and equate those situations with all forms of child abuse and neglect. I found that while taking a course in Child, Family, and State at my law school during my fellowship experience that initially, I was the only person in the room that was a parents' advocate but

through sharing my experiences with DFCA and explaining that all parents who are dealing with Child Protective Services are not bad people, I had convinced most of my class by the end of the semester that: (1) all parents that have made parenting mistakes are not bad people; (2) we need to advocate for more support from social service and governmental agencies to work more with parents to improve parenting skills, help relieve economic and other pressures that affect parenting decisions and families; and (3) advocating other alternatives designed to keep families together (i.e. kinship care).

I am very honored to have had the opportunity to represent Equal Justice America as a Spring, 2012 Fellow at the Detroit Center for Family Advocacy. It is very difficult for evening/part-time students to have outside internship/externship opportunities because of our work schedules outside of law school. Being a respiratory therapist that works weekends, I have the flexibility to gain exposure to the areas of law I am interested in through the internship/externship experience. My experience at DFCA was great. The attorneys' and staff are some of the most professional individuals I have met and they were never too busy to help me in any way possible become a better law student and future lawyer. This experience has strengthened my resolve that no matter what legal area I pursue after law school, I will always be involved in parental representation issues to insure that parents have a voice in the Child Protective Service process and that education of the general public, lawyers, and the judiciary continues to keep the system changing from the antiquated notion that "Bad Parents = Bad People".

Respectfully Submitted,

Kimberly M. Adams

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Expected date of Graduation: December, 2012