

September 1, 2009

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am writing to thank you for funding my work at the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago this past summer. Being able to work with some of the most talented public interest lawyers on the Children's Law Project was an invaluable experience that will further prepare me for a career in public interest law. As a current third-year law student and Child Law Fellow at Loyola University Chicago School of Law, being able to help represent parents who have been wrongfully accused of abusing or neglecting their children was an eye-opening experience. My past experience with the child welfare system had been working with a Guardian ad Litem and Youth Attorney in New Mexico. Being able to draw comparisons and contrasts between the representation of the parents versus the representation of children will allow me to be a better, more zealous advocate for children. Although I preferred representing children, I realized this summer that in the vast majority of abuse and neglect cases, advocating for the parent or parents, if done properly, is ultimately advocating for the best interests of the child.

A lot of the cases that I worked on were cases where the parent, foster parent, or legal guardian truly was trying their best to provide for the child. There were numerous instances where I found myself not frustrated with the parent, but with system that was making it near impossible for the child to return to his or her parent, who really was the best placement for the child. The vast majority of the clients I served this summer were young single mothers who were living below the poverty line and were a minority. I was frequently frustrated at how difficult it was for our clients to navigate the system. The expectations placed on individuals who have had a child removed from their care by the state are too often unrealistic. I would constantly reflect on the fact that if I had such requirements placed on me, and I have the resources to more easily meet those requirements, I would have a difficult time meeting such requirements. None of my clients were resistant to the requirements placed on them by the state, such as attending parenting classes, going to school, counseling, finding a job, but they were realistic about what they could accomplish. It was always the little things, getting transportation, finding proper identification and documentation, fitting in the state's requirements into an already busy schedule of work and raising children, that were most frustrating for my clients.

Unfortunately, because of the nature of abuse and neglect cases (they can remain in the courts for years), I was not able to see any of the clients I helped get their kids back. However, I did look for the little successes in cases. Helping a mother obtain a new license and social security card, informing a grandmother of her visitation rights, writing an administrative appeal in hopes that a finding of abuse and neglect will be expunged, those were the successes I was able to grasp onto. Even if I was not able to help an individual past the advisement stage, I still felt as if I did something for that person. All too often people just need access to the right information, and I always knew that I would at least be able to point any of my clients in the right direction if I was not able to help them myself.

The practical skills that I learned at LAF this summer, and that I hope to build on this fall semester as I continue working there, will be of great assistance to me in the future. Although I consider myself to be quite proficient on the telephone, by having to conduct client intake, I learned the importance of knowing when to listen and when to subtly move a conversation along. I also learned through a particularly difficult client, that sometimes my personal advocacy, or the advocacy of the agency as a whole, has reached the end. I would have liked to help every person that came through the door, but I soon learned that there are some individuals who either cannot accept the help, or are not fully capable of following through with the help. There is only so much I can do as an

advocate, at some point the client has to take ownership.

This letter may sound heavy handed, and as if there were no bright moments, but that is far from the truth. I can honestly say that I learned more at LAF working on the Children's Law Project this past summer, than I have at any other internship. All of my day-to-day experiences at LAF combined to give me a whole new perspective on public interest law.

Following law school, I know that I will pursue a career in public interest law. Whether I become an advocate for children or for any other underrepresented population, because of my experience at LAF, I know that I will be an effective advocate that is able to look at an issue from all sides and come to a rational solution that serves my client's needs.

I truly thank Equal Justice America for funding my experience this summer. Please let me know if I can ever be of further assistance to your great organization.

Sincerely,

Mia L. Kern
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