

September 1, 2009

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

First and foremost, thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to serve the public sector this summer under an Equal Justice America fellowship. I sincerely enjoyed my experience at Manhattan Legal Services (MLS) and feel that I made a significant contribution to their important efforts.

Like any public service organization, MLS has a sizeable amount of clients and cases they would love to assume but a limited amount of attorneys to sustain that load. As a summer intern, my job and the job of my fellow interns was to help the attorneys shoulder that burden by performing various research, writing and clerical tasks necessary to moving claims along. As the summer progressed however, the opportunities to become more involved with the clients and the cases manifested themselves quickly. Before long, I found myself conducting client interviews, independently representing clients at administrative hearings, and negotiating settlements with landlords in rent controlled apartments. The legal experience was incredible, but helping those who could not help themselves was priceless.

I'll share a few anecdotes on some of the cases and clients that I worked with this summer. "Mr. T" was a hard working gentleman of Russian origin who immigrated to this country about 15 years ago. He was having trouble with his landlord who refused to honor a Section 8 voucher for subsidized housing on his apartment. Unable to pay the costly rent, Mr. T would be forced to vacate the only home he had ever known since coming to this country. After contacting the landlord's attorney, the MLS attorney and I were told that the landlord would not honor the voucher seemingly for some inconsequential details. The landlord was firm in his refusal and we sought to initiate legal action to compel acceptance of the voucher. Two other attorneys from Milbank Tweed joined us (one spoke Russian) and we all sat down to brainstorm and choose our best course of action. We decided to call the landlord's bluff and correct the "mistakes" on the voucher. This correction could not be accomplished with a little white out and would require either the issuance of a new voucher (a long process) or a letter from the Housing Authority insisting that the original voucher was valid. Like any good intern, I googled the housing authority and realized they operated just two floors below us. An attorney would probably use traditional means to contact the Housing Authority, but I decided the direct approach would help expedite the process (or get me thrown out by Security). Rather than ask the very busy Chairwoman to draft a letter for my client, I penned the letter myself to save her the time. She very much appreciated the gesture and graciously signed off on the voucher. Not only that, but we established a direct line of communication between MLS and the Housing Authority to help future clients accelerate voucher processing. All said and done, Mr. T kept his home and we avoided a costly and drawn out legal process.

There are countless Mr. T's out there who can't make heads or tails out of the mess present even in the simplest legal matters. "We can't help everyone, but everyone can help someone." – Ronald Reagan. This summer with the help of Equal Justice, I just tried to help a few "someones."

Mr. S, a Spanish speaking 78-year-old immigrant from Puerto Rico was facing eviction from his rent-controlled apartment over noise complaints. The case was up for an Administrative hearing and Mr. S did not understand the process or the complaint against him. Part of my role in that case was not only to prep Mr. S and his daughter for their testimony, but also explain the legal procedure taking place and the consequences at hand. Unfortunately, my Spanish is very weak, but with the help of a Spanish interpreter and the establishment of a trusting relationship, we were able to successfully navigate the hearing.

There are many Mr. S's and T's who require legal representation and advice and are not receiving the assistance they so desperately need. Your organization's support for young lawyers entering the public sector is crucial for these individuals and the overall betterment of society. I am proud to have been a recipient of an Equal Justice America fellowship this past summer and hope that I represented your fine organization appropriately.

All the Best,

A. Michael Wargon
Fordham