

August 27, 2008

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I spent this summer as a student attorney with the University of Michigan Law School's Child Advocacy Law Clinic. I became interested in working with CALC through taking the clinic as a 2L this past Spring. During the school year, I was able to make a few court appearances, meet some young clients and get an overview of the way the regional dependency courts operated—essentially what one seeks and expects from the clinical experience.

When the opportunity came up to continue with the clinic over the summer, quintupling my caseload and being able to experience a wider variety of legal opportunities, I was excited. And, with the help of Equal Justice America, I was able to devote my summer to the clinic.

Much of what I loved about the summer was the opportunity to do legal work I didn't know I was ready for—first-chairing a trial, arguing with seasoned lawyers in case conferences, strategizing with co-counsel from the community. It was real and important work, and possible for a law student only in settings like the clinic. And it was possible for me only with the help of Equal Justice America.

The story I'd like to tell you about, though, isn't set in a courtroom. It's about a thirteen year old boy named Damien. He'd been a client of the clinic for a few years. We had handled his case since he came into the system, pushing toward an adoption last year and, since the disintegration of that placement, shepherding his case through the search for a new home.

Damien's situation was more stable than most of our clients, since he was living with a family member considering adoption. He had no pressing medical or legal issues. His file was also filled with comments about how low-maintenance his case had been. It was easy to assign a lower priority to diving into his case, and I did just that.

So, when I got a phone call from Damien one morning during my third week, I was surprised that he'd been suspended from school for talking back to his teacher and needed us to come talk to his principal. After my partner and I talked to the school staff for an hour and got him reinstated for the last two days of the school year, we drove him back home and

talked about how school was going. He was receiving Special Ed., which he told us was boring. We asked why and he said the teachers just had him color all day.

He said that he couldn't imagine going back to the same school next year, that he wanted to quit. He told us about a charter school in the area that's known for having smaller class sizes and more individualized attention. He had told his case worker and teachers about wanting to attend the school, but they cited his behavioral issues in telling him that this wouldn't work out.

Two weeks later, we got a call from Damien's case worker, telling us that Damien had failed the seventh grade and would have to be held back. Any chance of him transferring schools, she said, was gone. No matter that neither she nor we had been warned that he was in danger of failing. No matter that he spent hours each day coloring. He was going to have to do it all again.

The numbers of students who complete high school in Damien's city are much lower than they should be. It was hard not to mentally script how the rest of the story would go. Another year or two of being the oldest kid in his grade. Another couple years of talking back and suspensions and frustration, then no more school at all.

While much of my summer was spent in courtrooms and doing sophisticated work, there was little of this to do for Damien. He didn't need a brief or closing argument. What he needed was someone to call around, get the right paperwork, and make the pitch that he wasn't a lost cause, a kid to hand crayons to and keep out of the way. Unglamorous stuff, but it was the stuff no one had been willing to do for him.

Damien is going to his new school this fall, and it's not because he has a brilliant legal team. It's because he had people willing to say that he was important, willing to make a few phone calls. And that willingness was supported because of Equal Justice America, who thinks this kind of work is important.

Thank you for your generosity.

Sincerely,
Brandon Saunders
University of Michigan Law School
Juris Doctor candidate—May 2009