

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Over this past summer, I interned at the Family Law Unit of New York Legal Assistance Group. Specifically, I was a part of the Domestic Violence Clinical Center (“DVCC”) under the supervision of Amanda Beltz and Lisa Rivera. To describe my experience in a few words, it was life changing. I went from being determined to work in business and defense immigration to zealously working for domestic violence survivors.

When I applied for this position, I was hesitant since I did not see myself working in Family law. I knew I did not want to work with couples looking for divorces, and I especially did not want to work in an area of law where I would see families falling apart every day. During the first week of orientation, we were given examples of the cases handled in the DVCC unit, and I quickly realized that this fellowship might be quite heart wrenching. At that point, I decided that this fellowship was going to be a learning experience and not a career deciding fellowship. I have close friends and family members who have experienced heavy domestic violence. I come from a culture that does not “believe” that domestic violence is an issue and therefore there is very little done for the women who experience domestic abuse. I did not think I would be able to handle these types of cases and I did not, selfishly, think it was something I wanted to put myself through. However, that attitude changed quickly, after my first seminar and after I met my first client.

My first client is a 22-year old undocumented immigrant who married, who she thought was, the love of her life. She married a man who eventually started beating, raping and constantly emotionally abusing her. In addition to this, he forced her to work at a “happy ending massage parlor” and posted pictures of her naked body on social media. Needless to say, he did not treat her like a human being. I spoke to her several times on the phone, but the first time I met her was in the Safe Horizon room at the Brooklyn Family Court. She was petite, quiet and nervous. I accompanied her to her pre-trial conference where I got the incredible opportunity to be on the record as a law student. I sat with her outside the room as she nervously awaited the arrival of her husband. I told her it was going to be okay, and we were going to do everything we can to help her. She repeatedly thanked me and told me she hadn’t felt this safe in years. She explained to me that having a lawyer and two law students on her side made her feel the safest she had felt since she moved to the United States.

That moment made me realize that I could only see myself working in public interest law. I could not imagine what it would be like to be her, living in constant fear. Nonetheless, I was able to strongly connect to her. She was a human being. She deserved to be treated with equality and respect, and I was given the opportunity to help her.

My second client is a 26- year old undocumented woman who also married the love of her life. However, he quickly started beating her, being unfaithful and verbally abusing her. He abused her physically while she was pregnant with his child which forced her into a deep depression. She came into our office to tell us her story, and while my limited Spanish skills made it a bit difficult for me to understand her every word, I could not help but cry for her. As I heard the translation of her sentences, I could not believe how mentally and physically strong she is. Her entire family was in the Dominican Republic and without any help, she took care of her two children while experiencing hell from her husband. Her husband controlled her through the immigration papers he had filed for her. My partner and I met her four times, and when she finally finished her story, she told us she never wanted to speak about this again. We started her Violence Against Women Act (“VAWA”) application, and she felt hopeful for her children again. She was waiting to gain her freedom and her immigration application was the first step towards a new life.

In short, this summer fellowship was not simply another requirement to obtain my law degree. It was an experience I will carry through my professional and personal life. Ms. Beltz and Ms. Rivera gave their students the opportunity to be a voice for their clients. They kept a close eye and approved every detail of the case, while giving us the opportunity to handle every step of the case. Additionally, Equal Justice America’s funding made it possible to live in an extremely expensive city while doing what I, now, know I would love to do for the rest of my life.

Sincerely,

Astha Sharma  
Benjamin N. Cardozo, School of Law  
Expected year of graduation: 2018

To Whom It May Concern:

I write this letter on behalf of Astha Sharma. Astha is currently a student in the Domestic Violence Clinical Center; Astha began her work with the clinic over the summer and will continue with the clinic through the end of the year. The Domestic Violence Clinical Center at NYLAG allows law students to work on a variety of cases with representing victims of domestic violence. Throughout the program, Astha has worked on a Family Offense Case, a VAWA Self-Petition, and an uncontested divorce. Astha has worked on each of her cases with a student partner under the supervision of an attorney. The clinical position is unique in that Astha has had the opportunity to take the lead in her cases, developing the relationship with the client, drafting all of the relevant documents, and appearing and arguing in court.

Additionally, Astha has participated in the clinic's weekly classes aimed at developing her knowledge of the substantive law (family, immigration, and criminal) as well as practical skills (motion/petition drafting and trial skills). Astha has been well prepared for each class and actively contributes to our class discussions.

Astha's commitment to her clients and to the class work is evidenced by her enthusiasm as well as the connection she has made to her clients. We look forward to continuing to work with Astha in the coming months.

Sincerely,



Amanda Beltz, Esq. & Lisa Rivera, Esq.  
Domestic Violence Clinical Center  
New York Legal Assistance Group