

Dear Mr. Ruben,

When I tell people that I worked in Hawaii this summer, the reaction I get is a mixture of surprise and disbelief, often with a slight tinge of jealousy. Yes, I admit that you can't beat spending summer in paradise—in fact, I highly encourage any and all law students to try their best to find summer jobs near the beach. But, rest assured that I didn't spend all of my time learning how to surf and soaking up the sun; on weekdays, I was in the office from nine to five like any other law student. I worked for the Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice, a non-profit dedicated to using law as a tool to advocate for the poor and underrepresented peoples of Hawaii.

Victor Geminiani is one of the original founders and the current executive director of the Hawaii Appleseed office. A lifelong champion of the poor, he radiates a passion for the cause that has only grown stronger over the years. He began his legal career in Georgia working with the Civil Rights movement on cases focused on enforcing African American's voting rights and shutting down jails infamous for violating prisoners' rights. His dedication to providing legal representation to the powerless ultimately led him to Hawaii where he worked as the executive director of the Legal Aid Society before founding Hawaii Appleseed. During his time in Hawaii, he brought a successful class-action lawsuit resulting in improved living conditions at Kuhio Park Terrace, a public housing complex where residents had spent years suffering from bed bugs and defective pipes, air conditioning, and elevators. He also successfully won a case allowing children who become homeless to continue attending their elementary schools. His work is not profitable: Geminiani himself has been forced to turn to the state for financial support, and Hawaii Appleseed's small office boasts only four fulltime employees. In a world that so often favors the rich and powerful, people like Victor Geminiani fight on behalf of the voiceless to preserve the integrity of democratic ideals such as liberty and equal treatment for all.

In such a small office, resources are limited and the attorneys' plates are full. Summer legal interns are thus critical to the organization's work, and the research we completed served as the foundation for the cases the legal team brings during the year. In addition to myself, there were four other interns in the office, and each of us was responsible for developing an assigned project that has the potential to benefit Hawaii's poor. My work involved researching and writing a preliminary class-action complaint on behalf of Medicaid beneficiaries who had lost their health insurance coverage and the ability to access vital medical care despite meeting eligibility requirements. While the task was a daunting one, I enjoyed researching challenging legal questions and gaining hands-on experience that I know will be useful to me in the future. While in Hawaii, I caught my first wave, snorkeled with sea turtles, and ate some of the most delicious seafood I've ever had in my life. The sunshine, turquoise waters and endless beaches are enough to make anyone fall in love with the islands. And yet, I speak candidly when I say that working alongside inspirational activists and witnessing the effects of their selfless dedication ranks as the most memorable experience of my summer in paradise.

Caitlin Eberhardt  
University of Virginia School of law, May 2015