

August 29, 2015

Dan Ruben
Executive Director,
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Please allow me to express my gratitude for the generous support I received from Equal Justice America during my internship this summer. Though I was based in Richmond, Virginia, my fellowship allowed me to travel south to Petersburg to serve clients in need.

As you may know, Petersburg is an impoverished city with scarce legal resources for indigent clients. As if to drive home this point, many of the clients my office served in Petersburg came to us after enduring long legal struggles without the aid of lawyers. One client in particular sticks out.

On my first trip to Petersburg, I met with a client and her mother regarding a denial of educational services that had persisted for several years. The client, a fourteen-year-old girl, was blind and had suffered from multiple cognitive disabilities since birth. Despite this, her school records indicated that she was able to perform at or near grade level in most subjects when she received proper services.

Unfortunately, local public schools had repeatedly failed to provide those services, even in violation of the individualized education plans developed by members of school administration, themselves. In one case, instructors permanently separated the client from other students because they considered her a "distraction." In another instance, the school provided braille textbooks, but the books were only appropriate for students several grade levels below the client. Adding insult to injury, the client's mother was a teacher in the very school system that was denying her daughter the education she was entitled to.

After many disappointments, the client and her mother finally became hopeful when the client was admitted to a specialized school for blind and deaf students. Sadly, the school failed to understand the client's need for full-time, beyond-the-classroom care. After only three days, the school separated with the client. That was the last time the client received any sort of formal education.

By the time we met with her, the client had been out of school for nearly two years. Her mother, though obviously strong-willed and absolutely devoted to her daughter, seemed at her wit's end. As we went over the main points of our case and talked of writing a demand letter to the school, there was a palpable sense of relief from the mother and a feeling of optimism entered the room. The client, though seemingly detached from conversation because of her conditions, expressed a desire to return to school and

seemed genuinely happy about the idea of being able to return to a classroom with other kids her age. In particular, she looked forward to participating in a music class again.

At the time of this letter, I have not received news of a resolution in this case. Even so, meeting with the client, cataloging the schools' history of denying services, and drafting a demand letter gave me a tremendous sense of satisfaction. The client's mother spoke at length about her desire for her child to obtain the same level of education as her peers in spite of her disabilities. Having met the client and reviewed her school records, I truly believe this is possible. With that in mind, I was grateful for the opportunity to help.

Without support from EJA, I probably would not have been able to work on cases like this. More importantly, without this fellowship, the clients I served may have continued to struggle without the legal help they so desperately needed and deserved. EJA fellowships represent an amazing opportunity to do meaningful work in the legal field, and I am very thankful for the support I received.

Sincerely,

Charlie Ansley
University of Richmond