

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Family advocacy, particularly child welfare law, is the reason I became a lawyer. It informed the classes I took and the internships I pursued. When I came to the Family Advocacy Unit at Community Legal Services during my 2L summer, I knew I found the organization that would allow me to thrive as an attorney. Their strong team of family advocates brought out the skills I already possessed – mediation, building client relationships, advocating with community partners – and taught me how to weave them together on behalf of our parent-clients and their families.

I met Shannon in the lobby of Philadelphia Family Court. She was nervous, scared, and regretful, as her long period of sobriety had descended into a renewed opioid addiction. Shannon and her partner Rob were about to implement the last step in the family safety plan they worked on with DHS for months: they were consenting to their two daughters living with grandparents so they could attend inpatient treatment. While they were anxious about the long road ahead, they told me they experienced peace and empowerment knowing their daughters were with family and they were involved in the process.

In contrast, I never met my client, Rachel. Rachel's infant had Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome and after her birth, she was immediately taken to a hospital across the city. It was extremely difficult for Rachel to spend hours on the bus to visit her baby, and after a few weeks, Rachel stopped visiting. I sat in court without Rachel beside me and wondered how her child's life might have changed if she wasn't immediately separated from her mother. The child welfare system is intended to foster cases like Shannon's, but too often, cases look more like Rachel's. Correcting the disparities between Shannon and Rachel's experiences and using the law to achieve outcomes that put families first is the reason I became a lawyer.

Due to the dedicated parent defenders at places like Community Legal Services, children are less likely to end up in foster care for poverty-related issues like housing, utility payments, and child care. Parents are able to seek and maintain treatment for substance abuse and families can remain bonded and together during tough times. I was honored to be part of their ranks for the summer, and hope to join them upon graduation.

Sincerely,

Gillian Schaps
Harvard Law School
Class of 2018