

September 19, 2013

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Dear Mr. Ruben,

At a very young age I asked my parents why people had to choose between jobs that “did good” for the world and jobs that allowed them to afford a lifestyle of their choosing. They never had a real answer for me, other than to say that they were confident that I would find a combination of the two. Well, I was a mere week into my job this summer when I realized that I had found that combination. I was doing something that I felt good about day in and day out, while simultaneously being able to pay my bills, in large part thanks to Equal Justice America.

This summer I had the opportunity to work for University of Michigan Law’s Child Advocacy Law Clinic. In this position, I represented clients in abuse and neglect proceedings in the Genesee County 7th Judicial Circuit Court and Washtenaw County Trial Court, and wrote and argued motions before these tribunals on a regular basis. At the end of the summer, I was asked to continue with one of my cases through the Fall Semester in order to conduct a jury trial in the coming months. Additionally, I also had the chance to work with the Juvenile Justice Clinic and represent minors charged with criminal law violations in Michigan’s family courts. One of my greatest takeaways from these experiences was being both frustrated and impassioned in seeing how indigent defendants have the most to lose, and often the fewest resources to rely on.

In order to best exemplify my experience, I wanted to let you know about the two cases that resonated with me the most this summer. In one of my Child Advocacy cases, my partner and I represented the guardians of a beautiful little 9-year-old girl, who also happen to be her paternal aunt and uncle. This little girl has been living with them since she was a two-month-old baby, since her parents were unable to care for her. She calls them Mom and Dad and, to her, her biological dad is a stranger. Unable to sustain a job or housing, and perpetually struggling with addiction, he hasn’t seen his daughter since the day he gave her up over eight years ago. He hasn’t called her on her birthdays, he hasn’t sent her a card on Christmas—nothing. Yet, when our clients began adoption proceedings, he vehemently objected and began threatening them and their other children. This struck a chord with me because this wasn’t the first time I had seen a “deadbeat” parent not want to give up rights to his/her child. Even though they know they aren’t able to care for this child, and they have no relationship with the child, it seems to be a parental instinct to not let go or give up. I certainly respect this sentiment, however, my job is to do what is in the best interest of the child. In this case, it is in this little girl’s best interests to be with her aunt and uncle.

At the end of the summer, no resolution had been reached, and with a trial to terminate her father’s rights around the corner, our clients asked my partner and I to stay on and conduct the trial for them. As the system goes, what was originally scheduled to be a September trial has now become a

November pre-trial and a February trial. With every court hearing we have, I see the frustration in our clients' eyes. Not only are they concerned about the legal outcome, but they are emotionally drained, as their little girl eager awaits each hearing and asks them "Am I your daughter yet?" as soon as they walk in the door from court. The most rewarding part of this case has been to provide both legal and emotional support to these wonderful parents who have always and to this day *still* only want to do what is right for this innocent little girl.

In one of my more compelling Juvenile Justice cases, I was working with a young man who, at the age of 16, had committed a series of crimes with friends over a three-week period. He was charged with three felonies and two misdemeanors. He paid restitution and completed probation and, since that time, he has gone on to graduate from college, serve in the Peace Corps, and begin a Masters in Sustainable Development at one of the best programs in the nation. His career goal is to work for the federal government, either USAID or the State Department. The rub is that he has been told that, for most of the positions he is interested in and qualified for, he will need a security clearance, which he cannot get with his record.

In spite of Michigan's recent amendments to its juvenile "set-aside" laws, our client still did not qualify for this. For these reasons, I spent the majority of the summer working on a gubernatorial pardon for him. Given the dramatic and positive changes in my client's life, I reached out to the Judges who adjudicated him in order to garner letters of support for the pardon application. To strengthen my argument, I conducted research on brain development as it pertains to juvenile culpability and used this in conjunction with Amici briefs on the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents. After all, the point of juvenile delinquency proceedings is to provide rehabilitation to young people and to get them back on the right track in life. My client's behavior over a six-week period when he was a teenager should not impair his life opportunities into adulthood, particularly given that he has a record of more than a decade of exemplary conduct and impressive achievement. Though we have not yet heard back from the Governor, I am hopeful that he will recognize my client's potential to benefit Michigan, the nation, and the world and, as such, be willing to give our client a second chance

These are just two examples of more than a dozen cases that I had the pleasure of working on this summer. When I compare summer job stories with friends, I can whole-heartedly say that I believe I got the most substantive and worthwhile experience that has no doubt prepared me well for a career in public service. Without the generosity of Equal Justice America, as well as my friends and family who donated to the Work-A-Thon, my summer experience could not have been possible. And for this, my clients and I are incredibly grateful.

Thank you so much for proving my younger self wrong.

Sincerely,

Nayda Verier-Taylor

J.D. Candidate, May 2015

University of Michigan Law School