

August 27, 2009

Mr. Dan Ruben
Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 104
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am writing to express my gratitude to you and Equal Justice America for supporting me in the completion of my summer internship at the East Bay Community Law Center's Neighborhood Justice Clinic (formerly called Community Legal Access Service Site). My experiences this summer broadened my understanding of the hardships faced by low-income people in this nation and solidified my desire to work for a more socially just world upon graduation. I am very grateful to you for making this possible.

The Neighborhood Justice Clinic provides general legal help to low-income residents of Alameda County during three weekly clinics. Our clients often came to the clinic as a last resort—their issues or their income levels did not meet the specified requirements of many legal aid agencies and thus they could find no one to represent them in complex legal cases. The majority of the clients I helped were in pro per litigants who were being sued and harassed by debt collectors.

On one level, I was able to help these clients unpack their legal issues. We helped them understand what papers they had been served with, helped them prepare for court dates and even helped them write motions and discovery answers. In this sense, we were able to help make the intimidating and inaccessible legal system seem somewhat manageable to under-resourced in pro per litigants.

In some situations, however, it became clear that one of the most important services I could provide was to simply bear witness to the hardships our clients faced, the inhumane ways in which they were being treated and the emotional toll it took on them.

This was particularly true for clients who were being sued by original creditors. For instance, one client had been laid off from his job as a gardener due to the failing economy. As he searched for a new job, he began to use credit cards to pay for some of his expenses, expecting that he would eventually be able to pay them back after he found new employment. As the economy grew worse, it became clear his chances of finding a job were slim, and so he stopped using his credit cards. Soon, the regular calls from the debt collectors began pouring in. Overwhelmed and without resources, my client sunk into a depression. He found himself barely able to deal with the creditors and frozen with fear about how to handle a debt collection civil suit that had been filed against him. Unwilling to declare bankruptcy and unable to find any friends or family with resources to help him pay off his debt, he had little in the way of hopeful options.

Another regular client faced a very similar set of circumstances. She had lost her job as a teacher, used her credit cards to buy essentials and was being sued and harassed by the debt collectors. While I helped her through the legal steps of her case, I found she was most grateful for the respectful and caring manner in which she was treated at our clinic. I was able to give her a sense that someone cared about what she was going through, was there to help her through it and understood that she was not being treated in a just manner by the system and by the creditors.

My experiences with these particular cases left me appalled at the ways in which our justice system fails the poor and underrepresented. It became clear that the law is being used by well-resourced plaintiffs as a tool of intimidation against people who lack power. I also came to see that consumer debt issues are complex and cannot always be best addressed by an adversarial court process. My sense of outrage at these facts inspired me to stay on working at the clinic this semester. I am keenly aware that much work needs to be done to make our legal system truly just. It is my hope that in a paper for the seminar that accompanies the clinic, I can further address these issues.

Thank you for making my summer experience possible. As stories poured in about clients losing their jobs, homes, possessions, and even their emotional strength, it became increasingly clear that it is important now, more than ever, that we step up as a society to help each other in times of need. This is not a time to cut back on giving money, time and support. Instead we need to marshal all the resources that we can to share with others. I am truly grateful that Equal Justice America continues to step up and support people in need. Thank you for enabling us, as law students, to do so as well.

Sincerely,

Nell Schaffer
Berkeley Law, Class of 2011