

September 22, 13

Dan Rueben
Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 204
3540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to you and the rest of the Equal Justice America team for providing summer funding this past summer. As a result of the Equal Justice America fellowship I was able to work with Legal Services of South Central Michigan in their Family Law Project.

In my role as a summer intern, I worked directly with low-income survivors of domestic violence. I was allowed to manage a full caseload of clients, conduct interviews, draft pleadings and motions, and observe mediations. These practical experiences resonated with the lessons I learned during my first year of school and enriched my understanding of how the law can be used to empower individuals and change communities. Each of my clients provided a unique opportunity to combat traditional stereotypes and help women rebuild their lives. Thus, it would be nearly impossible to single out one client as having the greatest impact on my experience with the Family Law Project. So, to synthesize my summer I would like to share Ana's* story. Like most of our clients, Ana was referred to us by the local domestic violence shelter. Unlike most of our clients, however, Ana was only as old as I am. Up until the point that I met her, most of my clients had been middle aged women with multiple children, many of whom, unfortunately, had been in abusive relationships for longer than I've been alive. This generation gap protected me. It allowed me to distance myself from the issues my clients faced and lessened the stress I felt when handling any individual case. After all, these were adult women who had seen and experienced more than I could even imagine. They were survivors, and I felt relieved of some pressure knowing that they would continue to survive without me. But the first time I met Ana my paradigm shifted. Like me, Ana is a graduate student at the University, and like me she wears glasses with thick plastic frames, carries a heavy back pack, and strategically covers her tattoos. I was humbled by her likeness and after meeting her for the first time, I approached my work with a renewed sense of empathy and urgency.

Ultimately, Ana was not my youngest client this summer but working with her encouraged me to invest more in each subsequent case. Ana made the stakes of what I was doing very real, and highlighted the role luck had played in my circumstances. Though I am no older than she is, and know no more than she does, Ana placed tremendous faith in me and with that came a tangible sense of responsibility.

At the end of my tenure as a summer intern, I was hired by the Family Law Project as part time project coordinator. In this role I continue to work directly with clients and am further tasked with engaging my classmates and building a community of educated, thoughtful, and dedicated student volunteers. Ideally, as I move forward, I will continue to work with clients like Ana and be able to advocate on behalf of low-income women. Thank you again for the opportunity. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any additional questions

Sincerely,

Shanti Tharayil

*Client's name has been changed to protect her privacy.

University of Michigan 2015

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