

August 20, 2006

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
Building II-Suite 2004
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Dan,

My name is Shilpa Ram and I am one of the Summer 2006 Equal Justice America Fellows, based at the Medical-Legal Partnership for Children at Boston Medical Center. It is with great joy and tremendous satisfaction that I tell you this summer has been everything I hoped for and more.

The Medical-Legal Partnership for Children (MLPC), formerly known as the Family Advocacy Program, was created in the early nineties to promote the health and well-being of children, specifically low-income children, by addressing some of the external factors that affect children's health such as housing, utilities, income supports and education. I first heard about MLPC on National Public Radio nearly two years ago in a special fifteen-minute segment that aired over Thanksgiving weekend. I had been considering attending law school for some time, but wondered exactly how to practice law in a setting that would ultimately be as fulfilling to me as teaching in the inner-city as a "Teach for America" corps member had been. Suddenly, after fifteen minutes of listening, I had my answer. "This," I told my parents triumphantly, "is exactly what I want to do."

I embarked on my summer internship on May 30th along with six other interns. The first two weeks were particularly intense, as we became acquainted with each other and the policies and procedures at the hospital, attended hour-long trainings in several aspects of the law, visited the offsite clinic where we would be working and shadowed a pediatrician at the Boston Medical Center-based clinic a few doors down. The trainings, conducted in large part by the staff attorneys and focusing on such areas as immigration, housing and family law, would prove enormously useful to us as we began our intakes with clients. "More than anything," the lawyers would tell us, "we hope that these trainings will trigger alarm bells in your head when you are working with clients." I reflected on this statement a great deal during orientation. Perhaps a client would come to me and tell me that her ceiling was leaking, but, in talking to her, I would see that she was also behind in her electric bills, undocumented and might even be a victim of domestic violence. Delicately, and with a lot of support from the staff, I would learn how to address many of the difficulties that she and her family were facing.

After orientation was over, my supervisor, whose specialty was immigration law, transferred several cases to me, asked me to read through the files, and gave me a sense of what the next steps would be. Then, I'd call my clients, consult with the appropriate attorneys, talk to electric companies, talk to the Social Security Administration, and schedule conference calls with attorneys and clients to try to isolate and resolve as many issues as I could. I would also pick up additional cases at clinic, either by observing the staff member in charge of clinic

(which I did at first), or by actually conducting the intake myself (which I started doing toward the latter half of my internship).

The intakes were challenging because of the volume of information that we needed to collect during the course of a 45-minute session. We started off by collecting personal biographical information, but soon moved on to weightier issues such as immigration status, children's health, wages, food stamp eligibility, and the client's assessment of his or her reason for consulting with us. During my internship, I worked directly with clients on such issues as relocation from neighborhoods known for extreme community violence, asylum applications, SSI appeals, and food stamps applications and reapplications.

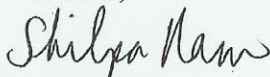
It was inevitable, perhaps, given the nature of the situations I was navigating and the fact that I was fortunate enough to be able to communicate with many of my clients in their native language, that I began to build a rapport with them. Many even recognized my voice as soon as I called. They regularly asked about my family, asked how I was doing at work, or merely left messages on my voicemail wishing me a good day. Many of the cases I worked on were wrenching, and I felt grateful to be able to lend a sympathetic ear to my clients; even if I didn't yet have a solution for them, I at least had a plan of action.

The MLPC staff was supportive and encouraging throughout the summer. The lawyers who supervised us took the time to discuss the intricacies of each case with us; to answer policy questions that we might have, especially with regard to immigration and housing; and to listen if we needed to express any feelings of stress or uneasiness. Case Review, which took place over lunch every Monday, was a wonderful forum for the lawyers and interns to meet and discuss not only the most recent cases from the clinics, but other issues that affected our consults with our clients or general problems that arose. I found most of the staff- and most of the other interns- a great pleasure to work with. It is rare to be in the company of students and staff who are so devoted to what they are doing! I recognized this dedication and zeal from the very first day, and reveled in it every day thereafter.

My only criticism of my summer internship is something for which I would also express my thanks: the enormous amount of work we had to do. Our workload was such that I was normally under intense pressure to complete everything I needed to complete before the next assignments came in. Perhaps our plates were too full for a single summer. Still, I am enormously thankful to have been entrusted with so much responsibility, for the summer would not have been nearly as rewarding had we been given less substantial work to do. I suspect that many of us will e-mail our supervisors in the coming months to ask about some of our clients. We may be sure that our work has paved the way for positive – or at least encouraging- outcomes for many of our clients.

My heartfelt thanks go to Equal Justice America for selecting me as a summer fellow. Receiving funding for the summer allowed me to support myself while doing something that gave me a lot of joy and fulfillment. I am most grateful for the opportunity.

Best Wishes,



Shilpa Ram

Washington College of Law, American University 2008