



"I AM GIVING SOMEONE A SAFE SPACE"

Britta Momanyi, EJA Services Fellow, Summer 2020

By Mike Putnam, M.Ed., Ph.D.

"During my first year of law school, I became very disillusioned. I didn't feel like I had a place in law," said Britta Momanyi, now a 2nd year student at Duke University School of Law. "The cases that you read, especially in 1L, are sanitized. You're not getting to know the people, and their life experience, none of that. The concept of 'Justice' started to feel out of reach, an ideal, an abstraction."

Ms. Momanyi, had always wanted to work "in the public interest, for justice," she said. But she soon began to question the whole enterprise: "Am I meant to be a lawyer?" she wondered. "Is this what lawyers do? Is the whole justice thing a facade?"

Equal Justice America changed all that. Over the summer of 2020, Ms. Momanyi participated in a Legal Services Fellowship through EJA in the Domestic Violence Prevention Initiative at Legal Aid of North Carolina. "The internship showed me there is a place for me," she said, "there are attorneys who are doing the type of work that I want to do."

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Intern bio:

- Name: Britta Momanyi
- Law School: Duke Law School
- Organization: North Carolina Legal Aid

The Toxic Oppression of Poverty

Ms. Momanyi's supervisor, Rebecca Eden, Staff Attorney at LANC, was one of those lawyers. In the domestic violence unit, many of the clients needed translators, but sometimes they were hard to find in court (domestic violence courts remain open during the pandemic). Ms. Eden would use her "very limited Spanish" to connect with these clients as best she could. Some lawyers would "see this as a burden" Ms. Momanyi said, "I knew the amount of cases she had, but it was never rushed. She would take that time to check in with them on a personal level. She embodied the idea of 'this is what we do.'"

For Ms. Momanyi, this humanizing connection became the hallmark of the good work lawyers can do. Because she comes from a mixed-race, low-income family, Ms. Momanyi closely identified with some of the clients at LANC. "People who grow up under those circumstances," she says, "have an internalized sense of inferiority. It's the toxic oppression of poverty. You're so used to not being heard. You're used to being told that you don't matter. You feel powerless."

For clients like this, Legal Aid is "their first and last chance to have justice," Ms. Momanyi said. For her, making it clear to her clients that they were being heard when she worked with them was a key part of that justice.

I've Finally Found My People

During the Covid-19 pandemic, much of American society slowed as people were forced to stay home. However, for victims of domestic violence, the abuse not only continued but it was often exacerbated.

My client was "fearful in her own home," Ms. Momanyi said. "It really hit me: *she has no safe place to go.*"

Ms. Momanyi had worked in policy before, and admits that her work there may have had broader impact, but she "didn't feel connected to it." The EJA fellowship was the "first time I worked directly with people that I could identify with on a human level."

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She interviewed clients, drafted complaints, helped with restraining orders, drafted examination and cross-examination questions for the trials, and prepared clients for trial. Through all of this she felt "I am giving someone a safe space."

The lawyers at Legal Aid of NC became true mentors. "Their palpable passion and tireless commitment exemplify the type of attorney I hope to become," Ms. Momanyi said. "In advocating for 'my people,' I feel like I have finally found 'my people' - those who make it their life's work to promote equal justice for all."