



"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963

Martin Luther King, Jr.
Summer Internship and Fellowship Program

Pennsylvania
LegalAid Network, Inc.

THE DRUM MAJOR 2013

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. MEMORIAL



"I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits."

Quote and inscription on the south wall of the MLK, Jr. Memorial

"Make a career of humanity, commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country and a finer world to live in."

Quote and inscription on the north wall of the MLK, Jr. Memorial

July 31, 2013

To the 2013 Martin Luther King, Jr. Interns:

We are pleased to present you with the 2013 edition of **THE DRUM MAJOR**, which is a small token of appreciation for your efforts this summer.

Through your work during the past ten weeks, you have touched the lives of many clients who have nowhere else to turn. You learned how to use your skills to make equal justice a reality.

For this, we thank you. Wherever your paths may lead you, we hope that your experience here will be an inspiration and a reminder of how you can make a difference.

Very Truly Yours,



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Drum Major: A Commitment to Selflessness

“Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won’t have any money to leave behind. I won’t have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just wanted to leave a committed life behind. And that’s all I want to say.”-Martin Luther King, Jr.

The excerpt above is from the Drum Major Instinct sermon preached by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. Before becoming an MLK intern, I had never had the opportunity to read the sermon preached by Dr. King. I suffer from the drum major instinct similar to others, but I also believe that for me it is a good thing. I have always known that my career would involve helping people. It was not until I went to law school that I realized it would include a career in the public interest field.

After joining the public interest group at my law school and listening to current public interest attorneys talk about their experiences, I became excited about learning more. I applied to multiple internship opportunities for my 1L summer and accepted an offer from a public interest organization that focused on criminal law issues. This internship was solidification that I wanted to work in public interest and public interest only. Now I had to decide what aspect of public interest I wanted to work in, which is why working for Legal Aid of Southeastern Pennsylvania (LASP) this summer in Bristol, PA was so crucial. LASP has afforded me the opportunity to perform work in almost every area of law they provide services in. I have been exposed to work relating to bankruptcies, social security benefits, expungements, custody, protection from abuse, unemployment compensation, and power of attorney. I also had the opportunity to represent clients in protection from abuse cases. Having the satisfaction of knowing I helped a client obtain the desired outcome is a great feeling and why I think most attorneys work in this field.

I have had the pleasure of working along side some great attorneys at the Bristol and Doylestown offices. All of the attorneys that I have met are committed to the work that they do. I believe it takes a special kind of person to work in this field, specifically I believe it takes the type of person that Dr. King explains in the excerpt above and throughout the entire sermon. These attorneys are committed to representing their clients to the best of their abilities, committed to serving the less fortunate, committed to equal justice, and do not perform this

type of work for the money. Now, not to say that these attorneys don't aspire to have some of the materialistic successes that Dr. King talks about, but their successes relating to equal justice and serving others come first.

I am often asked when people find out that I plan to work in the public interest field, "why don't you go where the money is?" My response is always "money isn't everything." For me, my career path includes being able to live comfortably, but more importantly it means helping those who may not be able to help themselves. During my field placement at the Fund for Advancement of Minorities Through Education (FAME), I was introduced to the quote "To whom much is given, much is required." Standing where I am today, I know that I have been exposed to many opportunities and received help along the way from people who believed in my success. Because of this, I believe it is my duty to do that for others. Working in public interest law affords you many opportunities, but most importantly it allows you to serve the community.

Although working in the public interest field has its many successes, it is not easy. By the time clients make it to our offices, many of them are frustrated, angry, sad, and maybe even all of the above. As a public interest attorney you must realize that these feelings are not directed towards you but at their current situation. You have to be able to talk to people and build rapport, so that they will freely tell you the information you need to adequately represent them. Working directly with the clients is something else that I really enjoyed. As a public interest attorney you are more than just the legal representation for the client. You are often a broker of services and a listening ear. I had a few clients who after we took care of their legal matters just wanted someone to listen to them talk about what is going on in their lives.

Overall, attorneys who work in the public interest field represent what Dr. King spoke about. They have the drum major instinct, but it is directed towards the service of others. They strive to be the best at serving the less fortunate. I was very lucky to be able to be surrounded by such dedicated attorneys and I look forward to my career in the public interest field.

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MEET THE NEED

“You are going to be a very rich man!”

These were the words spoken to me by an old friend a few months ago, while I was interviewing him for my Introduction to Business Organizations assignment. He was referring to my decision to go to Law School, and the potential prospects of never ending billable hours, and never ending clients with money to spend. I quickly corrected him because I never associated Law School or lawyers with money; I associated them with opportunity, and a certain skill set which could make a difference. To me, the pursuit of this skill set could be the difference between one person being able to provide for themselves, a family saving their home, or an entrepreneur being able to make their dream of becoming a business owner a reality and providing a steady stream of revenue for a few in a society. This journey is not about the tangible wealth our society measures with sequences of zeros, it is about that wealth which we have grown to ignore, the wealth that comes from within.

“I like to look at things from a holistic view point. What [they] come in for, may not be what they need.”

When I had my first conversation with the managing attorney at North Penn Legal Services in Bethlehem, PA, she asked me where my interests lie. Knowing I was potentially deciding what the core of my existence would be for the summer, I was hesitant, but finally I admitted I was interested in Consumer Protection and Bankruptcy, but I was open to everything. On my second day, we were faced with a client who requested our services because she could not gain acceptance into subsidized housing due to her debts. Not yet possessing any practical skills, my first thought was to research the law on the matter, but the managing attorney expounded some wisdom, and I realized I needed to know more about the client and her financial situation. My first lesson was that the issue presented may be but a glimpse into something more. But most importantly, along with this skill set comes the ability to be a problem solver. I learned to try to solve the problem, as opposed to using a Band-Aid to cover it up.

“If those guys in Washington want to know the real America, they should come and meet my clients.”

Being immersed in the world of legal services, I had the opportunity to meet some interesting attorneys, paralegals, secretaries, and clients. These individuals had a wealth of knowledge to share, and existed in a world I thought I knew, but knew very little about. A

volunteer benefits advocate revealed to me interesting stories about what he had experienced through his service. We discussed the amount of money his clients were trying to attain so that they could support themselves. The funds were so small that nobody could reasonably aspire to those amounts. I can never forget when he shared that while his clients were waiting to be granted benefits from a pool of funds which they had paid into for most of their lives and were in need of, they were forced to live on the fringe of society, possibly engaging in illegal acts to get by. The real America, it turns out, is not the picturesque abundance of summer vacations, current year cars, and white picket fences. The real America is a collection of stories having similar themes of getting by, and hoping for a better tomorrow.

“It’s good to know that sometimes, you can make a difference. That is what you do this for.”

Feeling without the power to affect successes, I continued with my duties and finished every task without the assumption that anything would amount. On my fifth week, I wrote two letters on behalf of a client who had lost his leg and home when his diabetes became unmanageable, and was being denied access to subsidized housing, and the other for a client who was being denied a job she was assured of by the employer due to a record that did not relate to her duties at the company. These two cases revealed to me that our system which should help those who fall short, sometimes end up being punished for those moments, years after the fact. Even a man who fit the textbook definition of those who deserve subsidized housing was being denied due to past debts. My advocacy work for these two individuals resulted in favorable resolutions only days later. The attorney who assigned the advocacy letter for the client facing a barrier to employment congratulated me, but I cannot help but think of those who are unaware there are some who are willing to fight on their behalf.

I have been inspired by these men and women who have given me the opportunity to be on the forefront of the fight to help the real America. They have reaffirmed that the journey which my peers and I are lucky enough to partake comes with a responsibility. We must beat to the drum which calls out through the cries for help. We must look beyond the superficial prestige of the profession we have chosen. We must use this opportunity for the greater good, and we must meet the need.

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Reducing Barriers to Health Care and Meeting Fundamental Needs

Medicaid -- or Medical Assistance as it is known in Pennsylvania -- is a vital form of health insurance serving low-income children, adults, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Unfortunately, many beneficiaries or would-be beneficiaries go without health care benefits because they are unaware of how to navigate the MA program or are improperly denied eligibility or services. The Pennsylvania Health Law Project strives to represent these vulnerable groups and ensure they receive the health care they deserve. As an intern at PHLP, I had the opportunity to work directly with clients and see the tremendous difference that advice and advocacy can make to their quality of life.

PHLP's clients represent some of the poorest and sickest individuals in the state. My clients' incomes often hovered around or below the federal poverty level, and many suffered from multiple, serious medical conditions, such as Stage 4 cancer, heart problems, and schizophrenia. By the time clients called PHLP's Helpline for assistance, they had usually tried unsuccessfully to fix their health coverage problems on their own, leading to frustration and dire situations. Clients denied or terminated from MA described how they were going without crucial prescriptions because they simply could not afford them -- they had to buy food and pay rent first, they explained, and were barely scraping by. Others informed me that they had stopped visiting their doctors altogether and were skipping treatments because of the cost.

My work involved conducting intake with these clients and determining whether they were eligible for MA. If they were, I helped clients with the application process, or in more complicated cases, advocated on their behalf with ombudsmen or managers at County Assistance Offices. MA eligibility rules are complex, and County Assistance Offices were not immune to errors.

In one case, a mother of three called because she wanted to know why her two young children and newborn did not qualify for MA. The County Assistance Office had told her that she had to choose between obtaining coverage for just her newborn or for her two older children. She had picked the latter without understanding why she was being forced to make that choice, and her newborn was now uninsured. After numerous calls to the CAO and some research, I discovered that the CAO had misapplied MA rules and deemed income to the children inappropriately. All three children should have been eligible. I explained this to a

manager at the CAO, who agreed with me and asked a caseworker to review my client's file. The caseworker acknowledged that all three children were eligible and finally placed the infant on MA, much to the mother's relief.

Relief was a common feeling among clients who, because of PHLP, finally obtained health insurance or services they urgently needed. One client who had tried contacting numerous agencies praised PHLP as the first place she had received thorough help that led to her getting coverage. Another woman, calling on behalf of her sister who had grown so ill she could barely walk, thanked me for saving her sister's life after I determined she could be eligible for MA.

Comments like these underscored the importance of PHLP's work. Without PHLP, many would be unable to access critical benefits they are entitled to because they are unable to afford legal representation or have physical and mental impairments that make navigating a convoluted system even more burdensome. And health care benefits play a central role in preserving people's well-being and financial security. Everyone will experience illness at some point in their lives, and high-quality, affordable health care should be available to all.

I gained invaluable experiences at PHLP. By fielding calls from clients and working on cases, I learned about how Pennsylvania's Medicaid system functions and the problems and gaps that prevent people from accessing health care. I also learned how to be a better advocate from PHLP's attorneys and paralegals, who all care deeply about their work and their clients' struggles. My own clients' stories, however, will probably leave the most lasting impact on me. They will serve as a reminder of why I want to pursue a legal services career and how much value there is in improving individual lives. Organizations like PHLP help people meet fundamental needs. I was fortunate to be a part of that work this summer.

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Making a difference: Patience, Humility and Respect

We must combine the toughness of the serpent and the softness of the dove, a tough mind and a tender heart.

– Martin Luther King Jr.

As I traveled from a small college town in North Carolina to the big city of Philadelphia, I wondered what it would take to become a good advocate. My summer at Philadelphia Legal Assistance Inc. (PLA) has helped me answer this question. At PLA I worked with the Family Law Unit. The Family Law Unit at PLA helps clients deal with challenging custody battles, protection from abuse orders, and much more.

Often, people criticize the legal profession, over generalizing a group of people because of a few bad apples. I find this to be offensive to those lawyers who spend countless hours working to attain a court ruling which could significantly improve their client's life. At PLA, I have been surrounded by lawyers who care about their clients and most importantly, work hard for their clients. I have learned several lessons from my mentors at PLA, and through my experiences with my clients; I understand now, the importance of making the most of my client-advocate interactions in order to most effectively help my client.

In order to get to the truth, an advocate must not only be savvy, but also patient - patient because situations which require a drum major for justice, deal with an injustice. An injustice requires patience from an advocate, to get the whole story from the client. Moreover, find the missing pieces of the puzzle, to help solve the client's problem. It is not easy for anyone to share difficult and even traumatizing experiences. Thus, this is where respect for a client goes a long way. If someone feels as if you do not respect them and empathize with their situation, that person will be less inclined to give you the whole story. Every client who I assist is given my respect and utmost attention. Quite often, clients feel frustrated with their situation because they don't feel in control. This is where an advocate must show compassion, and possibly share a few words of support and encouragement to help a client in their time of need.

I feel honored to be able to help people, who otherwise would be left to deal with a somewhat flawed system, which creates multiple hoops for people to maneuver through. Moreover, a justice system which many people have a fear of navigating through. I've had many clients cry or hold back tears, when telling their story, and sharing their frustrations. My experiences with these clients prove just how sensitive these issues really are. During my experience, I have felt stress and heartache from hearing some of my client's stories. I believe

this is normal, especially, since this is my first time acting as an advocate on such personal issues, which are not my own. However, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated, courage and humility can go far, when advocating for social justice. The humility, which Dr. King is known for, is the mindset I have when I speak to my clients.

The lessons which I take home with me from my experience at PLA, give me the tools I need to better help my clients. These experiences are just a foundation for what's to come. Nevertheless, I owe it all to the healthy, diverse environment which I have been fortunate to be a part of at PLA. Not only have I interacted with clients from all walks of life, but the PLA team, is in itself very diverse. I've learned from lawyers, who are from all over the country and worked alongside colleagues from various law schools. My interactions have taught me a valuable lesson. Don't assume anything! You never know what a client may be going through. It is our job as advocates for justice, to make sure that our client is treated fair, as all people deserve to be treated.

What I've learned will forever be invaluable to me, in my life-long endeavor to help those who can't help themselves. I can't thank Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network enough, for choosing me as a Martin Luther King Jr. intern, and giving me an experience of a life time. What I've learned as part of the Family Law Unit at PLA, will go back with me to North Carolina as I finish law school. I will continue to nourish my skills as an advocate, so that I may continue to help low income families. The need for public interest attorneys in our society is a void which I plan to one day help fill. My personal march for justice, will continue, one client at a time.

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Help For Those Who Cannot Help Themselves

“God helps those who help themselves” is a phrase that was preached to me by my mother as a child. The phrase never really resonated with me until I met a client at MidPenn Legal Services. She was a mother who truly loved her son. She’d raised her son all of his life. The judge said that wasn’t enough as she was considering awarding primary physical custody to the child’s grandmother. The client had no job, was not in school, and was living off of social security disability. The judge asked her, “Do you plan on living off of the government for the rest of your life?” Unfortunately, we lost that case.

Throughout my time at MidPenn, I learned that we, as Americans, all have different dreams and different levels of opportunity. Most of the clients that I spoke with did not want to further their education. Many of them are comfortable with the life that they have because it is all that they know. The various hours that I’ve spent talking to clients about the facts of their cases has been a life-changing experience. I’ve had really good conversations and some, really sad.

I understand that “God helps those who help themselves,” but we all have a different definition of what a good life constitutes. For that client living off of social security, she only wanted to provide her son with love, a place to sleep, and food to eat. Her parents had not gone to school and it was not something that anyone ever discussed with her. She has a different outlook on life.

Many times, I found myself in my office after a conversation with a client, teary-eyed. It was sad to hear the various stories from each client. It was even sadder when they cried. After talking with each client time after time, I felt like I had really come to know each of them. One client would answer the phone and say, “Hey buddy,” when he knew it was me calling. Even though I was saddened by many of their stories, it brought me great joy to see their smiles after an agreement was reached. Most of those agreements were made simply by the attorney speaking to both parties. One of the most gratifying feelings in the world is to help someone with an issue when they have nowhere else to turn.

Even though MidPenn is a public interest law firm that provides free services, many of the clients were still required to pay for psychological evaluations with money they didn’t have and sometimes couldn’t get, even when at times it seemed unnecessary.

When I witnessed smiles on client faces, after favorable but somewhat minor decisions, I could always count on hearing Attorney Pamela Fleck to say, “It’s about the big and little victories.” I slowly began to use those words throughout my time at MidPenn.

Between helping caretakers get primary custody of abused children and helping judges decide what is in the best interests of the child, it became very apparent just how crucial legal aid attorneys are to indigent communities. They truly help those who cannot help themselves. Moreover, I was inspired by the dedication and devotion the attorney showed to each and every client.

I now know that no matter which area of law I choose to practice in, my goal is to help people, especially those who cannot help themselves.

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I Am Nothing Without My Morning Coffee

I am nothing without my morning coffee. Everyday I enjoy a few quiet moments to myself as I sip from my NLSA mug that reads, "Equal justice is for everyone." I am sitting back in my chair reflecting on my weekend or the night before. Wondering when I'll have the time to see a movie at the theater, catch up on some sleep, or better yet how to make it big on reality TV. I would soon learn that when my phone rings or my email indicates a new intake, those problems are minuscule to the problems our clients' face on an everyday basis.

The first week at Neighborhood Legal Services was filled with an intense training on landlord tenant law. By the end of the week, myself and another intern were already assigned our first client. She was a Section 8 tenant being evicted from her home. Like many of our clients she had very limited income and a child to support. We prepped over the weekend for the hearing on Monday. Even though the landlord didn't show up, our client was extremely happy to have us in her corner, applying the law and advocating on her behalf.

When I was assigned my first client to represent by myself, I was nervous to say the least. What if lose? Would I let the client down? These questions raced through my mind as I read the brief notes from the client's intake. Of course, the facts were not the most favorable to the client, but as I came to learn from the other attorneys in the office, there are always some facts that can be used to the clients benefit. This client in particular was living in house that was plagued with problems - everything from leaks to sewage back ups, to pieces of the ceiling just falling to the floor. At times her house wasn't fit for her to have holiday dinners or celebrate her children's birthdays. When we finished with her case, I distinctly remember the look of relief on her face. When I asked her if she was happy that she could put this behind her, she responded that she "was just glad that she had a home to go to."

I could share a number of stories about the clients that I have helped through representation or advised on the phone. When I think about what I learned through my experience with NLSA, I think about what our clients go through every day and what NLSA means to them. As frustrated as I may get about unreturned calls and missed appointments, I try to remember what other responsibilities our clients have - finding a way to get to work, trying to find a job in our struggling economy, turning in documents to Section 8 in order to keep their housing voucher, going to the public assistance office to get benefits, or fighting with the landlord about not cutting their utilities off.

So now when I come in the office and take that moment to enjoy my coffee my reflections are different. I think about what happens to the single mother with children if she loses the only type of housing she can afford, or the elderly man who's being sued for credit card debt after several calls from the credit company threatening to take his possessions, or any client about to have their utilities shut off. If they didn't have legal services as a resource, whom could they turn to? Without an advocate in their corner they could be left with nothing, and that's worth doing something about.

Lastly, I would like to thank the attorneys and support staff at NLSA for their guidance and support throughout this experience. They made the office a very enjoyable environment to work in. I know that the skills I have learned at NLSA will be applicable throughout my career.

Yvelisse Pelotte
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Encouraged to Change, Determined to Serve

I was educated at inner city public schools and received my bachelor's degree from a Pennsylvania state school. I am an obvious racial minority in my classes at Temple Law School and I am an obvious racial minority at any event hosted for attorneys, the exception being those hosted by the Black Law Student Association. I do not have any attorneys in my family and I am not "connected", like many of my colleagues. Despite these "challenges" I consider myself lucky because I am a first generation college graduate and I have had the privilege of participating in things my parents and grandparents did not. I am articulate and hard working and have done well for myself. I am respected by my peers and the professionals that I encounter. I have one year of law school left; however, based on the precedent within my family, I have ostensibly made it. And therein lays the conflict.

When I meet people they assume, based on the way I speak, dress, and carry myself, that I must be the daughter of upper middle-class parents. They assume that I was raised in a suburban neighborhood and likely have rode through life feeding from a silver spoon. When I tell people I was born in the South Bronx and raised in Harlem they do not believe me. While I accept these as compliments that speak to the way I carry myself, I am often offended by the implication that people from a certain place must look, act, or speak a certain way. Based on the way I present myself and my academic success no one understands why I would be dedicated to public interest. I am encouraged to get a job at a big law firm so that I can make a lot of money. I am encouraged to change my path and mold myself to fit into the box others have painted me into. I have been told, as recently as yesterday, that dedicating my life to public interest is a waste and I should be determined to serve -- myself. These people are who I believe Dr. King was referring to when he spoke of those who do not "harness" their drum major instinct. They become self absorbed and engage in snobbish exclusivism. They "become forces of classism". I have seen first hand the effects of this mentality and I am determined to avoid perpetuating it. It is not until I divulge the "secret" about my upbringing that people slightly begin to understand my passion for service and my disdain to be painted into their box of the type of attorney I should become.

I have not traveled through life feeding on a silver spoon but I have fed on the sadness I experienced growing up in poverty and being faced with a lack of food, sub par education, violence, addiction, and homelessness. Having experienced the effects of poverty drove me to endeavor to lift myself, and my progeny, out of it. Additionally, it drove me to strive to lift others out of it, too. When people encourage me to change my rebuttal is: I am encouraged to

change! I am encouraged to change the way people view those who live in poverty. I am encouraged to change the way the system treats low income citizens. I am encouraged to change the status quo. I am determined to serve my community and poor people because I realize that while making a lot of money is nice, when I die God is not going to ask “how much did you make this year?” I recognize that through serving the poor and underprivileged I am serving myself because at any moment I could be where they are.

I am blessed to be finishing up my second summer as a Martin Luther King, Jr. Intern. This summer I had the privilege of working in the landlord tenant (private housing) unit of Community Legal Services of Philadelphia. The advocates are extremely intelligent and knowledgeable in the area and despite having worked in the field for decades, are extremely optimistic and high spirited. They embody a sense of hope that I envy. They have spent years hearing stories that would rob even the most optimistic person of the belief that they can change things, yet they still believe that they can make a difference. George Gould, Linda Ware Johnson, Mike Carrol, Noe Hernandez, and Leandre Jackson still become impassioned and outraged when they hear what clients face and then allow those feelings to translate into zealous advocacy. Years of seeing how flawed the system is has not deprived them of the belief that it can be changed but encourages them to work harder.

The stories I heard this summer were absolutely awful. The people I counseled lived in conditions most people would not believe possible, let alone legal. The people I advised faced treatment by other individuals and governmental agencies that people with money never would. I sought to assist where possible and was able to provide varying levels of help, ranging from referrals to tenant organizations to representing clients in court. This summer in Philadelphia has magnified my desire to serve because, unlike the struggling private sector, there are masses of clients in the public sector seeking to be helped. Whereas private attorneys are creating crafty ways to attract new clients, Community Legal Services turns hundreds of clients away on any given day. The need to serve is greater now than ever before because there are so many people counting on our services and if we do not do it, it will not get done. This summer in Philadelphia has given me a greater sense of hope and has reminded me of why I have chosen to harness my drum major instinct and am encouraged to change and determined to serve.

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I Lift My Lamp Beside the Golden Door

“Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

- Emma Lazarus, "*The New Colossus*" 1883

Imagine a young twelve year old girl living in a small town in Mexico. Picture her being forced to have sexual relations with a man twice her age. The repeated intercourse results in two children being born to a girl before the age of sixteen. She enters into the United States without inspection through Texas in hopes of finding a better life and freedom from victimization. Unfortunately, her suffering did not stay on the other side of the border. A few years later while pregnant with another child her then boyfriend was physically abusive. Due to the nature of her abuse this blossoming young woman was able to obtain a U-Visa.¹

Regrettably this story is anything but fiction. Sitting across from me was this strong and courageous woman, pen in hand. As I sat there, watching her listen to Peter explain the application process for becoming a legal permanent resident, I could feel an overwhelming joy build up inside me. Although I was not there for her entire journey, I was a part of her path to obtain citizenship. For this young woman obtaining legal permanent residence and eventually citizenship is more than a change in where she lives.

After enduring years of victimization and domestic violence, legal permanent residence signifies freedom. Freedom not to be forced to have sexual relations. Freedom not to fear being physically abused. Freedom to be happy and independent. Ultimately, becoming an American is not just about changing legal status, but about being free to express your whole identity, unafraid.

Community Justice Project also does much work with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). This is a process through which certain people who came to the United States as children and meet several key guidelines may request consideration of deferred action for a period of two years, subject to renewal, and would then be eligible for work authorization. This is an important step in helping these children, who had no say in coming to this country illegally, to finally feel like a part of our society.

¹ The purpose of the U visa is give victims of certain crimes temporary legal status and work eligibility in the United States for up to 4 years.

I have never felt like an “American.” To me, being an American means having FREEDOM. Free to be whatever you work hard for and always having a fair shot and not being held back by your Race, Gender or Sexuality. In my case it's my illegal status that keeps me down and unable to better my life. To ICE I'm a criminal for being brought to this country when I was 5 yrs old. I have never been in any trouble with law enforcement but have always feared that at any moment someone in my family can be separated and sent back to a country that doesn't feel like home. The US is where we feel at home but unfortunately we don't yet have the freedom that most Americans take for granted. We are a family without a country and have been for too long now! *Rene, Tampa, Florida*

Rene’s story is not the only one. Like her, many children who were brought to this country illegally feel like they never truly belong. Having the opportunity to help in this process is not only fulfilling but also gives me a tremendous sense of satisfaction. Although DACA is not a pathway to citizenship per se, these applicants can turn it in to such and eventually fulfill their dreams. Those children, who have grown up as Americans in pursuit of the American dream, should not be punished for their parents’ actions. When it comes to adults who consciously make the decision to come here illegally, a child has no choice but to follow, just as your children would have no choice but to follow you. This is the only home many of these Dreamers have known and they should be encouraged to pursue the American Dream.

My time at Community Justice Project has shown me what my true passion is and opened my eyes to what I want my future to become. I’ve always known that immigration was an area of interest for me. Coming from an immigrant family that has worked hard to climb the stairs of society, I wanted to be able to help others on the same path. Much like our statue of liberty, as an attorney I want to symbolize freedom and hope for a better future. I want to **“Lift My Lamp Beside the Golden Door.”**

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No Easy Answers for Everyone

During my 1L year, the University Of Pittsburgh School Of Law's professors emphasized that when clients come to our offices, they come with problems, not outlines of all the legal issues. That concept has repeatedly proven to be one of the most important things that I have learned. As best they can, clients give us facts, paperwork, and other relevant (and sometimes irrelevant) information. Clients may or may not be familiar with the law(s) regarding their problems. Clients may only know that something is wrong and that someone must do something to fix it. Clients approach us hoping that we can help solve their problems and restore some sense of normalcy. Unfortunately, even with centuries of precedent, vast compilations of legal analysis, and the assistance of attorneys who have come before us, we cannot always find desirable answers. However, because of our commitment to our clients and our desire to help them improve their situations, we continue to dig for answers that will enable them to move forward.

To me, the search for answers is especially important when providing legal services to lower-income individuals. Lower-income persons cannot afford the same lengthy, drawn-out legal processes that some higher-income individuals can. Lower-income individuals can also not afford the high-priced lobbying that can change the system to their benefit. Because of those monetary imbalances and disadvantages, public interest attorneys have stepped up to try to help close the gap between legal need and legal access. Unfortunately, even with public interest attorneys' efforts, many issues remain unaddressed, and questions receive incomplete answers or no answers at all. However, despite the challenges behind answering people's needs, public interest attorneys and law students like me continue to strive to provide equal access to justice.

Sometimes practical limitations prohibit us from answering questions. Many times I overheard a Regional Housing Legal Services (Regional Housing) attorney field phone calls from individuals seeking legal service that Regional Housing simply does not provide. Knowing this man's concern for others, if Regional Housing offered the service, and if he had the time and resources, I confidently believe that he would have taken on every case possible. However, even though public interest attorneys dedicate their careers to serving others, reality's limitations prevent us from answering all questions. Fortunately for those callers, even though the attorney could not take on their cases, he always tried to direct them to the proper resources and agencies.

Sometimes the first answer we seek leads us down a rabbit hole filled with new questions that we never thought to ask and new answers that we never thought to seek. The first case on which I worked seemed to perpetually evolve in that manner. A Regional Housing attorney had asked me to research whether members of a residents association had an easement to a water supply, of which the association would later become receiver. Importantly, the water supply rests on a separate parcel from residents' properties, and we had concerns that if the water supply owner sold the parcel, the residents could lose their access to water. We hoped to establish a protected right to maintain water service that existed independently from the receivership.

My research led me down a twisting path—a path filled with switchbacks and dead ends—through Pennsylvania property law. Due to inconsistent and unclear use of terminology, I continued to go back and forth over the issue of an implied easement to a water source on a separate parcel of land. Additionally, I questioned whether residents had an irrevocable license. Somewhere in the weeds of Pennsylvania case law the license lurked, but like the will-o-the-wisp that lures weary travelers into the swamp, we chose not to chase it. Of all the possibilities, I felt most confident that it did not appear that the residents could claim water access rights under the doctrine *profit a prendre*. That final conclusion did teach me the following valuable lesson: sometimes knowing what the answer is not can be just as helpful as knowing what the answer is.

Once we thought we had a handle on the legal basis for an implied easement, we began to ask how we could protect residents from a possible rate increase by a future owner. In my search to find legal price limitations for private utility customers, the water supply began to take on the form of a public utility. Although that eased some of our concerns over customer access and price protection, it raised more concerns about receivership responsibilities. Keeping in mind that we might be dealing with a public utility, I then had to find answers regarding the scope of a receiver's authority and responsibility. Despite other attorneys' help in our search, we still had many questions, including practical matters such as how the residents association can cover the costs of their newfound legal responsibilities if the original owner did not pay compensation.

To complicate matters, the residents association wanted to address onsite illegal waste dumping and vandalism of vacant properties. Those issues raised legal questions regarding waste management, trespassing, and the scope of the receivership. Like other legal matters I researched, I found no single, definitive answer that addressed every concern. Instead, I had puzzle pieces of law clouds and fact sky that I had to arrange in a way that could help protect our client and enable them to mitigate waste and vandalism. With no picture on a box to follow (just the picture in my head), I assembled my receivership jigsaw puzzle and gave it to my supervising attorney to rearrange, add, and remove pieces. I hope that when the judge receives

our puzzle, the pieces will hold together and that the judge will see the same picture that we tried to form.

Throughout the process, we maintained regular contact with the residents association. We knew that the members cared deeply about their community and simply wanted the freedom to take care of that community. To them, this was not a series of letters, memos, petitions, and orders. To the residents, the issues involved their homes, their health, and their safety. We could easily empathize with their desire to maintain the property and do the work that the owner had refused to do. However, as their attorneys, we had to try to keep them on a tricky path, a path on which the wrong step could send their goals and objectives tumbling down a ravine. At times, we found ourselves giving them the answers that they needed, even though they did not necessarily want those answers. At those times, we could only do our job and hope that people would listen.

If I said that I found easy answers at more than one or two turns, I would be lying. Perhaps, though, that is why we have internships. If all of the answers were quick and easy, law students would not set up forts in libraries, arming themselves with casebooks, supplements, and outlines, preparing to do battle with papers, finals, and ultimately the bar exam. Students would not accept internships, externships, and research positions that pay little or no money, all for the hope of learning something that might help them in the future. In turn, practicing attorneys and judges would not need clerks and interns to review current and pending cases; research relevant law; and write something that hopefully resembles an intelligent and reasoned argument.

Our clients may or not know all of the work and effort that we put into their cases. They may or may not know just how murky the law can be. Our clients do know that they have questions and that they need answers. They may want answers to serious problems or answers to seemingly innocuous situations. Clients may or may not ask the right questions, but that is not their job. The attorney must ask the right questions and find the best possible answer. Unfortunately, as much as our clients rely on us, we cannot always find the answers that they need or want. We can only find the answers that exist—or that no answer exists. Sometimes we have to form completely new answers and try to convince a judge or agency that we are right. If we are lucky, the answers that we come up with will provide some relief to our clients.

Like other public interest attorneys, the search for the right answers that can hopefully help someone drives my commitment to public service. We scour the pages of countless documents, examining sections, breaking down sentences, and looking up the meanings of individual words, trying to determine one way or another whether the law gives our clients legal recourse. We continue our searches for the right answers because if we do not, only those who can afford legal assistance will receive it, creating greater imbalance and injustice

For those of us committed to public interest work, people's limited access to legal representation is in and of itself an uneasy and difficult answer to accept. We reluctantly accept it because it is reality, but it is a reality that we choose to strive against and change. We do so because in the future, when someone asks what we did to make things better, I think that we all want to give an answer that gives us a sense of accomplishment and allows us to rest easily.

Regional Programs

- Community Legal Services
- Laurel Legal Services
- Legal Aid of Southeastern Pennsylvania
- MidPenn Legal Services
- Neighborhood Legal Services Association
- North Penn Legal Services
- Northwestern Legal Services
- Southwestern Pennsylvania Legal Services
- Philadelphia Legal Assistance

Specialty Programs

- Community Justice Project
- Friends of Farmworkers
- Pennsylvania Health Law Project
- Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project
- Pennsylvania Utility Law Project
- Regional Housing Legal Services

Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network (PLAN)



Funding for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Program is provided by Pennsylvania IOLTA and the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare