

Beneficiaries to benefactors: Serving clients creates advocates for justice

by Jonathan Thomas, paralegal with the Clarence Darrow Court Clinic

I talk to them every day -- people who are doing good things, who just have fallen on hard times.

As a paralegal at Community Legal Aid, my job is to walk alongside our clients as they face some of the most difficult and troubling times in their lives. I get to see the change in their lives from the time they come to us, to the time they leave.

And that work really is a privilege.

It bothers me, then, to hear some of the stereotypes that persist in our culture about our clients. For those of us who work in nonprofit or advocacy realms, we tend to see the people we serve painted in one of two lights: they are often seen as either powerless victims, or as burdens on the system who lack work ethic.

Neither of these frameworks are correct, and both are harmful -- not just to the individuals we serve, but also to our collective ability to dismantle harmful and unjust systems.

Think about it.

The world we live in is interdependent, we rely on one another. There are many issues in our society that need solutions. The community of clients we serve could have solutions to these problems but are so overburdened with a lack of access to the justice system for representation, advice, relief of judgment, and resources, that they are unable to bring about the solutions to these issues.

By removing these barriers, we don't just resolve their individual problems and get them back to their lives. We empower them with new knowledge and experiences to be innovative, creative, and most importantly help others.

In order to do that, however, we have to dispel certain pervasive myths associated with poverty.

The people I work with are hard workers. They are running their own businesses, working jobs, and overall making good things happen for themselves, their families, and their communities.

If we learned nothing over the last two years of a global pandemic, it's that there are certain things beyond each of our control. And sometimes, you can do everything right, and you just find that life happens.

All of us, regardless of our status or story, face burdens in life. We have been in situations where we have had to take risks and live life in less than ideal circumstances, some of us more than others. But even in our personal trials and tribulations we had someone in our corner advocating for us allowing us to grow from our mistakes and rise above circumstances. This is why we are able to proudly advocate for others who are in need of a helping hand. We can walk them through life's challenges because we've been there before. And using our own knowledge and experiences, we can advocate for change and try to put in place more just and equitable solutions.

The challenges our clients face are huge and life altering: lack of stable housing, student loan debt, predatory debt, lack of access to the legal system as a whole, lack of racial equity. These challenges are magnified due to the circumstance of living in poverty, which in turn can derail their entire lives.

By stepping in and arming them with knowledge, resources, and support, we can empower them to resolve their problems without losing everything they've worked for. As well as providing them the opportunity to build on what they worked so hard to achieve.

And we can also give them the opportunity to become an advocate themselves and be an advocate to others who are in need of a helping hand.

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