

He did it, and so can you: Interview with a volunteer

An interview with Michael Sermersheim, VLSP volunteer attorney, emeritus

October is national pro bono month. This is a time to celebrate and honor the commitment of the thousands of attorneys who volunteer their time for an array of causes across the nation every year. Here at Legal Aid, we are proud to support over 300 volunteers who give over 1000 hours of time to support the wellbeing of the low-income clients and families we serve.

Yes, attorneys have an ethical duty of pro bono (Latin for undertaken voluntarily/ free of charge/ for the public good) service. But so many go above and beyond the call of this duty - both giving of themselves and gaining in ways they would never have imagined. Volunteers provide invaluable help at the individual level - expanding the number of clients who can receive vital legal assistance and lending their professional expertise for complicated matters. But beyond this, volunteers make positive system change. With diverse experience and fresh eyes, they are ideally poised to suggest new approaches and creative solutions. With a heart of giving, they help us all - from clients to judges to legal aid attorneys - recenter our dedication and remember the good out there.

In honor of pro bono month, Community Legal Aid sat down with attorney volunteer Mike Sermersheim. For the past 15 years, Mike has been humbled and honored to volunteer helping northeast Ohio's low-income residents solve their legal problems through CLA's [Volunteer Legal Services Program](#). He resists accolades or praise. As you will read below, he's truly just in it for the clients.

Please enjoy snippets from our interview with Mike last month. If his words - the joy that shines through them - inspire you to explore pro bono opportunities at CLA, please contact us at (877) 401-0088 or email vlspstaff@communitylegalaid.org.

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CLA: Welcome, Mike! Tell us how you got into volunteering with CLA.

Mike: For most of my career, I was an in-house attorney - I just worked and worked. I didn't have time to volunteer in the legal field. All my hours were spent at work, and what was left was spent with my wife, kids and our church.

I always knew I had it easier than some. My education and career options were laid out in front of me. I was able to afford my education. I was able to actually accomplish my goals through hard work. I don't think that's true for everyone - especially today.

I started volunteering with CLA in 2007 and have been active ever since. Even at the age of 73, I still feel grateful for my life experience and the opportunity to help others.

CLA: Was there a particular client or case that hooked you?

Mike: Legal Aid sent me a client who had been living a stable life. He was in his 80s, his wife died, and he was suddenly about to lose his home. I dug a little deeper and found his wife had a gambling problem. He mortgaged their home (a duplex) to pay off that debt.

I met this wonderful man in his tiny half of the duplex. He practically lived in a closet. There were four other people living with him in that unit and five more in the other half of the duplex. All were poor and had no means of self support. He essentially helped care for nine homeless individuals.

With just a small amount of effort, I helped save his home and transfer via probate his wife's share of the home to him (her interest in the home was never formally transferred to him).

I'll never forget when his daughter called me. She said "if he would have lost his home, he would have lost his soul and died." This case really showed me the impact volunteers can provide - this motivated me to do more.

CLA: What do you say to people who think volunteering with Legal Aid clients just isn't for them?

Mike: Yes, I've heard this. Some people tell me this work just isn't their "cup of coffee". They ask questions like - Haven't these people created their own situations? Aren't they in impossible situations to resolve? Don't you feel rather hopeless? My response is this - you don't know people well until you sit down with them, talk to them and get some perspective about them. Who knows what got people into their situation?

What I see collectively across our work at CLA - I see that we are truly helping people solve legal problems they couldn't solve alone. Maybe more importantly, we are helping them restore a sense of dignity in themselves and their life choices. Many have been dealt a card-like hand outside their control.

There are some we can't ever help, but we need to be able to look beyond them to those we can. Grant me the serenity and wisdom to know the things I can change ...

CLA: Any advice for attorneys who think they just don't have the knowledge or expertise?

Mike: (Laughing) I am one of them!

I'm a retired lawyer - I'm always reminded of how much I don't know. It's humbling to be back doing things I haven't done in 35 or 40 years. Or maybe never have done. It is an enriching and humbling experience.

Sometimes I help the Low Income Taxpayer Clinic with "offers in compromise" before the Internal Revenue Service. This effort helps people with significant tax burdens. Do you know what those are? (laughing) I didn't.

I asked Dana Goldstein, from the Low Income Taxpayer program, how some of the other volunteers handle some of the situations with such cases: "what do your other volunteers do?" She told me - you're the only volunteer who's ever helped with these! I found that to be very unfortunate for the clients - and for those attorneys who could (but chose not to) help.

My advice (to other attorneys with the inclination and desire to help) is to shed that apprehension of not being an expert. Just try it. I had my own big fears. I knew it had taken me decades to get certain expertise. Then I suddenly found myself walking into court again - something I hadn't for maybe 40 years - since my time in the Army JAG!

Yes, it's a profession and there are standards for professionals. Nobody wants to make any mistakes at all. But if you get hung up on that concern you won't do anything (a professional inertia). Bottom line - start small, aim small, miss small. Then expand from there, just like we all did all of our professional careers.

CLA: Can you tell us about a few volunteer experiences you've really enjoyed? Found really fulfilling?

Mike: Oh, I really enjoyed meeting with groups at the credit card debt clinics, explaining how they can respond to lawsuits against them, easing their stress and trying to help them with their situation. We helped them draft and file motions for a more definite statement - to help them clarify just how much they truly owed. This forced credit card companies (and debt buyers) to prove the debt; and sometimes they cannot. A few cases were dismissed for lack of evidence about the alleged debt. This was very fulfilling.

I've also enjoyed sharing some creative solutions or new perspectives - and I mean that in a really positive way. I once was working at a clinic in Stark County and we were finding that success rates for clients were surprisingly low. Instead of just providing advice to the clients, I started asking them to repeat it back to me. I said "Do you really understand what I just advised?" Some of the clients could not and did not. I shared that with clinic leaders so adjustments could be made. You have to move past those momentary setbacks...change your approach...

CLA: What are some tips you have for new pro bono volunteers?

Mike: For me, working with CLA clients was a whole different paradigm. You need to be persistent, sometimes you need to turn on the charm...you catch more flies with honey. A touch of kindness goes a long way. On the other hand, when you go into the courtroom - the judges, magistrates, and clerks all know you're pro bono. It's like

their usual defense mechanisms with attorneys seem to vanish when they learn I am a retired volunteer. They want to help me. It's just so very positive and rewarding.

CLA: How is the support from CLA?

Mike: It's excellent. Legal aid people are devoted and wonderful. I am frequently amazed and pleased by my interactions with them. They are humble and yet warm, and glow (if you will) with their commitment. That sort of dynamic doesn't just grow on trees. Passionate people who come together to help people. To be included with open arms by a group of that ilk is very rewarding and enriching. They've been nice to me - it's so easy to feel a part of the group.

CLA: Do you have any goals for yourself as a volunteer?

Mike: I hope to be able to continue to expand and assist and better manage my time. There are moments when my personal life gets in the way of helping others. Clients are patient and they seem to understand those limitations.

I can't believe I am still working on my time management in my 70s. You must keep growing and improving personally and professionally.

This article is part of Legal Aid's ["Big Ideas" series](#).

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[Print](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

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