

ED Update: Two years...three kids...one mission



I recently celebrated two years of being Community Legal Aid's Executive Director, and it's been starting to feel like the third year of marriage. You're over the honeymoon phase, the surprise is gone, and those quirky traits about your partner are becoming less and less cute.

And just like marriage, it's been a fun, crazy, rewarding ride - and one I wouldn't trade for anything.

We've made great progress as an organization in just a few short years of opening up our doors to the community, becoming a dependable partner for other nonprofit agencies, collaborating with the private bar on pro bono and access to justice issues, and digging deeper into the problems our clients face, and what they need from us to resolve those problems.

And as I look ahead to what's next for us, I find myself reflecting on how we - how I - got here.

It all started in 1997, on my first day at Legal Aid, when I met my first client. At just 19-years-old, he had guardianship over his two young nephews. This was stunning to me. He had just recently graduated high school and was still a kid himself. How could this be?

But this was no ordinary family.

Several years earlier, my client's sister and mother of the two little boys was killed while serving on active duty in the military. At that time, my client's mother, the boys' grandmother, got custody of the kids. And like most families that have faced such a terrible loss, they somehow found a way to carry on. The kids received survivor benefits, the grandmother had a good job, and my client was finishing high school.

But then one day, after finishing her shift at work, the grandmother said goodbye to her co-workers, walked out the door, and vanished, her car still in the parking lot, and was never seen or heard from again.

My client was beside himself. He had only recently graduated high school and had no means to support himself or the two children he now found himself responsible for. While the boys' survivor benefit checks kept coming, he had no way to cash them. He couldn't pay their bills - and that included their rent.

One day, their landlord showed up to find out why the rent was late. After hearing his story, the landlord told him to go to Legal Aid, because they could help. And we did. We helped with the survivor benefits checks, the guardianship paperwork and obligations with the court, and eventually even connecting with other family members who would go on to care for them.

Legal Aid changed the lives of those boys. And they changed me, too. They breathed life and meaning into the word justice, and helped pave the way for what would become my life's calling.

Now, more than 20 years later, the same things that ignited my passion for poverty law in that case still hold true -- the importance of community in rallying around those in need, the tenacity of the human spirit, and the unparalleled ability of the law to give people the chance they need in life.

It's been an honor and privilege to be a part of the Legal Aid team for more than two decades, and to serve as Executive Director for the past two years. I look forward to the coming years and all the changes that will come with them -- remaining firmly grounded in the foundation built by that first client and case.

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