LARC VOLUNTEERS DESCRIBE THEIR WORK AND ITS REWARDS

The Justice & Diversity Center’s (JDC) Legal Advice and Referral Clinic (LARC) is a free walk-in clinic that occurs on the second Saturday of each month in space provided by UC Hastings College of the Law in Civic Center and on the last Saturday of each month in the Bayview district of San Francisco. At these clinics, low-income clients are able to receive legal advice or referrals from experienced attorneys in various areas of the law. LARC is staffed in part by volunteers who primarily conduct intakes to determine the area of law each client needs assistance with, and then clients sit with experienced volunteer attorneys to receive advice or referrals. Each LARC session provides pro bono assistance for one to two hundred clients. JDC staff interviewed volunteer attorneys Trinidad Madrigal and Peter Ritling about their experience volunteering with LARC.

Trinidad Madrigal has worked with the Department of Child Support Services for San Mateo County since 1995. She graduated from UC Hastings College of the Law in 1979 and has worked with The Bar Association of San Francisco and San Mateo County Bar Association. She currently volunteers at LARC, helping clients with family law issues.

HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT AND WHY DID YOU BECOME INVOLVED WITH LARC?

When I was at law school at Hastings I worked at BASF’s Lawyer Referral and Information Service (LRIS) for about five years. Then when I passed the bar, I continued to work at BASF and also began coordinating the legal clinics at JDC. Then I left and went to work for legal aid and the Department of Child Support Services in San Mateo for many years. My son went to college a couple years ago and I decided to go back to volunteering.

WHAT CLIENT STORY PARTICULARLY TOUCHEd YOU AND HOW WAS LARC ABLE TO ASSIST THAT CLIENT?

I’ve always done public service. I was at the Bayview clinic in 2011 the first time I saw this woman. She had some family law questions, which were not complicated. She had lost custody of her kids because of substance abuse problems. The father had moved to Fresno with the kids, where she was litigating the case. She had gotten her life together and brought all the letters from social workers and counselors. She was trying to get her kids back. Her sincerity touched me and I was impressed with how her
kids motivated her to get her act together. I could tell she didn't have a lot of formal education. It's very difficult to fill out all the forms, and she has experienced a lot of barriers. She had to go all the way down to Fresno for the court appearances and to visit her kids. It really added to that adage “If there's a will there's a way.” It was very inspirational to me. She came back again in the beginning of 2012 because she was going to a first hearing and wanted to find out what else she needed to do and what documents she needed. I walked through the general process with her. She came back again later to say she had gained visitation with her kids, and I talked to her about custody and about her life in the Bay Area.

WHAT’S THE GREATEST NEED YOU’VE SEEN FOR CLIENTS?

Of the people I see it’s generally family law questions. Every single LARC I’ve done there’s been a child support question. For me it runs the gamut.

WHAT IS THE MOST REWARDING ASPECT OF VOLUNTEERING?

It’s giving back. It’s where my heart is; it’s why I went to law school.

ANY OTHER THOUGHTS OR COMMENTS?

It’s very rewarding to volunteer in San Francisco because there are so many services. There’s just a lot going on here. There seems to be a good network of communication. The [resource] books JDC provides are huge! It’s just been great working with the other volunteer attorneys as well.

Peter Ritling practices employment and labor law at UC Berkeley Labor Relations Department and volunteers at LARC once a month. He graduated from Tulane University Law School in 1991 and has practiced in San Francisco ever since.

HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT AND WHY DID YOU BECOME INVOLVED WITH LARC?

I think I was just looking for pro bono opportunities and looked at the BASF website and did some investigating. I sent an email to JDC, someone got back to me, and once I started volunteering I just got hooked.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN VOLUNTEERING WITH LARC?

Six or seven years.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT AN EXPERIENCE THAT REALLY SURPRISED OR CHALLENGED YOU?

Every time you think you’ve seen it all, so to speak, you are always surprised by the next experience. It’s always something new. It’s a wide range. It’s everything from very practical advice on the one hand, and on the other, people who have problems that go beyond just legal problems. Seeing people come in with anxiety and trying to help them feel calm is very rewarding.

WHAT CLIENT STORY PARTICULARLY TOUCHEd YOU?

I’ll answer this with the type of client that I normally see. My background is in labor and employment. So people come in with poor performance reviews and they get put on a performance improvement plan. As an employment lawyer I know what the employers are looking for and [they] are basically trying to get rid of these employees. I
help them come up with strategies to meet these improvements and also come up with an exit strategy to get out of their current employment. I like to give them several options. Watching their faces as they realize they have options is immensely rewarding. As an employment lawyer I know exactly how to help them move on with their lives.

WHAT’S THE GREATEST NEED YOU’VE SEEN FOR CLIENTS?

I’ll say two big needs. They’re having performance/conduct issues [or] there are people who have legitimate complaints about their employer and I can give them their legal options. They can go to the Department of Labor or Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. I think the other thing you see a lot of is debt collection cases.

WHAT IS THE MOST DIFFICULT PART OF VOLUNTEERING?

It’s dealing with the extreme need of legal services. First you have to get over this huge need that’s not being filled. The next decision is trying to do something about it. It’s about coming up with some kind of solution. It’s not just about knowing the law, but about being a problem solver and trying to figure out the next step.

WHAT IS THE MOST REWARDING ASPECT?

I think about this a lot. Pro bono in general is the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done because questions and human problems are all so different. It requires me to stretch my limit and you have to use your imagination to help legally and to make sense to the clients. It’s very rewarding. There are a diversity of issues and it’s extremely challenging to deal with these problems and find solutions. It feels like you’re actively involved in the community in San Francisco and I really like that.

ANY OTHER THOUGHTS OR COMMENTS?

I get more out of it than I give. I’m so glad I found out about this clinic. It’s the most rewarding thing I do as a lawyer and citizen.