



JUMPING IN

Demetria Vong-Spillan

have to confess that I have been sitting on the pro bono and volunteer sidelines for most of my legal career. There seemed to be so many reasons not to get involved (work, family, lack of experience). I felt as if I couldn't possibly help when I lacked the substantive expertise to assist with immigration or family law. And I hadn't set foot in a courtroom in over 20 years to boot.

I am pretty sure none of us got to where we are in our careers by giving up the first time we were stumped. So I started a process of self-education. I attended a CLE training. I volunteered as much as I could with legal clinics. And I waded into public speaking by volunteering to serve on a panel as part of the Justice and Diversity Center's Destination Law School program. Although I was nervous to speak alongside such accomplished attorneys (and a federal judge!), I was excited to help students with diverse backgrounds learn more about the law as a career. I recently looked at my email agreeing to volunteer with Destination Law School and I was concerned that my background as a corporate attorney ruled out helping with a mock trial.

The funny thing about pushing outside your comfort zone is that every new experience prepares you for the next. So when I received the email urgently requesting volunteers to help with the High School Mock Trial Competition, I raised my hand. If high school students are willing to train for months, when many of them had no experience with

public speaking or being in a courtroom, then I should be willing to devote some time to help out. It wouldn't be fair to cancel on them. How glad I was to receive a packet with instructions for scoring the student attorneys—I would not have to “wing it”! I was even more relieved to learn that mock trial is a closed universe, so we wouldn't need any materials outside those provided or use any rules of evidence other than those that were provided (and explained).

The evening was so enjoyable. The judge had fun, I had fun scoring the participants, and the students were unbelievable! Some quite clearly had little experience with public speaking. But they managed to make opening and closing statements, for which they prepared in advance, and they also had to think on their feet for direct- and cross-examination.

I had just decided that I would help again next year because I had such a good time when I got another urgent email: Could I possibly be a substitute judge that night for a last-minute cancellation?



Volunteer scorers and judges, including Demetria Vong-Spillan (fourth from left) at the February 2019 High School Mock Trial Competition

Now, wait a minute. I have never been a trial lawyer, let alone acted as a judge. But we all need new experiences to grow. I figured that I already knew the case and rules from my prior night as a panelist. And so I jumped into the role of judge without any real preparation to be a judge. And I had the time of my life channeling my inner Judge Judy. And the high school students who had prepared so hard were not disappointed.

We all have some area where we would like to help but feel we don't know where to begin. Whatever it is that pulls at your heart, jump in! Stop worrying about whether you are qualified to do something new. I ask you this—if you had a promotion opportunity at work in another area of law, would you sit down stumped? Or would you jump in, energized and excited to learn and grow?

My bet is you would reach out to your mentors and support groups and find your way. You can do the same with volunteer work, and give to those who need. Jump in!

Demetria Vong-Spillan is an assistant general counsel and director at Bank of America supporting its Renewable Energy Finance line of business. She joined Bank of America in 2000, and currently provides legal support to the leasing company's renewable energy and portfolio sales and acquisitions teams. Prior to joining Bank of America, Demetria was an associate with Latham & Watkins and Chapman and Cutler in Chicago, Illinois. Demetria holds a B.A. in International Economics from the University of Michigan and a J.D. from the University of Michigan Law School.