

Make an Impact: Volunteer Your Skills and Passion to Help Change Lives

Merri A. Baldwin

Most of us went to law school to make a difference. And every lawyer's work has an impact. The very nature of our practice is to represent clients: to advocate for them, to advise them, and, often, to be their representative, in matters that will have some sort of result or effect: that is why the clients hired us in the first place. Yet for many lawyers, their work does not always provide a high level of personal satisfaction. Other lawyers love what they do but want a different kind of experience, something more like what they expected when they went to law school.



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The Justice & Diversity Center (JDC) of The Bar Association of San Francisco offers every lawyer a chance to make a difference in the lives of individual people who need legal assistance and cannot afford it and who, if not for JDC, would have no place to turn. JDC provides representation both through staff attorneys and volunteers. In 2016, 1,367 attorneys volunteered with JDC, and through their efforts, enabled JDC to provide an estimated \$20 million of free legal services to more than 8,500 clients in San Francisco and beyond. In addition, JDC also provides important services through its diversity programs, including support, resources, and professional development opportunities to students from middle school through law school.

I want to talk about JDC in this column for a couple of reasons. First, the JDC Gala will take place on September 28. That event is a fun, vibrant gathering. As a bonus we hear firsthand from some of JDC's clients and students participating in the diversity programs. The money raised at the Gala is vital to supporting JDC's mission, and it will be great to see as many of you there as can make it.

Second, this year presents a growing need for the services that JDC provides. That means we need you. More than ever.

JDC's legal services include free representation of low-income tenants facing eviction, whether limited to their pretrial settlement conferences or through a full-scope representation up to and including trial; a tax clinic that provides critical assistance to low-income taxpayers who have nowhere else to turn; family law programs that provide assistance with child support, dissolution, and guardianship; legal clinics providing all manner of assistance to low-income residents of Bayview–Hunters Point, the Tenderloin, and elsewhere; and immigration representation, through JDC's Attorney of the Day program at immigration court and through the important work of the immigration collaboratives for which JDC serves as coordinating counsel. In addition, the Homeless Advocacy Project is located in the Tenderloin and serves both homeless people and people at risk of becoming homeless with a wide array of critical

services. And JDC's federal pro bono project operates through the federal courts, providing representation to pro per litigants in their federal court actions.

As many of you already know, there really is something for everyone who wants to help. Thank you to the many volunteers of JDC, many of whom are stalwart supporters who volunteer again and again to help. For the rest of you who have heard about JDC, or wondered how you could do something to try to make a difference, I am asking you to make this the year that you take that step.

A quick personal story. I have volunteered with JDC through a number of its programs. One client I represented was a young man seeking guardianship of his ten-year-old niece, whose mother is mentally ill and homeless and whose father is in prison. The child's grandmother, my client's mother, had served as the child's guardian until she suddenly fell ill and passed away from cancer. My client faced a few obstacles in his quest to become his niece's guardian. First, while they had lived in San Francisco for a long time, they were being forced out of their Section 8 housing and did not know where they were going to live. Second, my client had a long arrest record, which would have to be disclosed to the judge and which could possibly affect the judge's willingness to afford him the legal status he sought.

Stephanie Bilinski, supervising attorney of JDC's family law program, helped me as I represented my client. He moved to another county, and, once he found housing, we filed the guardianship petition there. (For those who have never seen a guardianship petition, it is no simple prospect. It would not be easy for someone to represent themselves in one of these matters. For this particular client, it would have been impossible.) We included the arrest record with the confidential part of the application and explained to the court that these issues were behind him; that he had not been arrested in a number of years; that he had changed his life circumstances; and that, while he had been arrested a number of times, he had never been charged.

The day of the hearing on the guardianship petition, I met my client and his niece at court. Both were nervous and uncomfortable in the courthouse. I did my best to make it seem less forbidding, but a courthouse is not a safe place for many people. In our hearing, the judge was warm and friendly, and spoke directly to my client, expressing his admiration for my client's willingness to care for his niece and the fact that he had turned his life around, and stating his belief that both my client and his niece would succeed together. All very heartwarming, and exactly what I had hoped for.

We then went down to the clerk's office to get the executed letters that would establish his guardianship. This was not as easy as it sounds. We needed copies that we did not have; we had to take a number and wait through a long process of being called to various numbered windows; I had to find a copier and come back to the window; and then we finally got the executed papers. The cost to get the executed letters my client would need to show that he was his niece's legal guardian, for school, medical purposes, housing? Over twenty-five dollars per copy, for necessary papers that other counties provide free of charge. Luckily, it was easy for me to pay: my firm will happily bear that expense for our client. Good thing, since my client did not have the money that day to pay for those papers if he had had to.

Why do these details matter? Because when we represent people of limited means, there are many barriers to accessing legal resources, some obvious, some less so. As lawyers, we have the skills to handle the substantive legal issues. We also have the opportunity to make the entire process one of possibility and hope, and turn a foreboding and daunting situation into one of success. This is true in every one of the programs that JDC offers, whether through our legal representation and services or our diversity programs.

I was very happy to help my client secure the guardianship and to help that new family as they set off in their life together.

Give back. Change lives.

Turn to pages 32 and 33 for an overview of volunteer opportunities with the Justice & Diversity Center. Help build a fair and equal San Francisco. It starts with you.

My representation of this client was relatively straightforward and did not take a lot of time. There are many JDC volunteers who handle much harder and more complex cases that take more time and resources. Thanks to all our volunteers and staff, who make such a difference in the lives of people throughout our community. I was honored to have the opportunity to handle this matter, and know that for its relative simplicity, it made a difference. This was a victory that feels as good as any in my professional career. See you at the JDC Gala.

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