



I BECAME a public defender because clients are not numbers. A man in chains is not the sum of the number of arrests his rap sheet and the number of dollars he can put towards a bond. A man accused of a crime is not his case number, his docket number, his arrest number, or his folder number (the number the jail in New Orleans names your client). A man standing at the podium in a courtroom, shackled and shaking is not the sum of a police officer's accusations and a prosecutor's office's conviction statistics. A client does not filter the number of constitutional rights that apply to him based on the number in a bank account, the address he lives at, or the checkbox he checks by race, gender identity, or national origin questions posed to him. I became a public defender because our clients are human beings: they are flesh, blood, and a beating heart. Clients are a sum of their histories; the families that raised them, the city they live in, the opportunities they have been given, the struggles and traumas of their past, their hopes, their dreams, their fears, their highest peaks and their lowest lows. Clients are human but the second handcuffs hit their wrists, they lose all identity. They pass through a system that is not broken. They are in a system that has never worked.

I BECAME a public defender because I was raised in a world with exposure to the criminal justice system, and I saw how easy it was to become a product of the system. A loved one who fought proudly for his country in combat who suffered from PTSD and subsequent substance abuse problems was known by his worst day, a moment caused by addiction, not by the fearless acts he did for all of us. His constitutional rights did not matter even though he fought to defend that very document. A loved one who suffered from debilitating mental illness struggled, finding himself in and out of jail cells and hospitals, known for things he didn't even remember instead of his talent for art, his breathtaking compassion for animals, and his creative mind. A loved one was known for drugs instead of the fact he was one of the greatest caregivers I've ever seen and found himself jailed, taken away from his child for a nonviolent offense, losing his career and his family. The moment they were accused, let alone convicted, they were a number. They were not the graceful, passionate, intelligent human beings who were a part of my own existence.

I AM a public defender. I cannot imagine being anywhere but in my office, surrounded by the fellow humans who walk the hallways of criminal court in New Orleans, who spend hours at the ironically named Orleans Justice Center waiting hours to see clients who may never appear for that visit or who may have been “shipped” like cargo to a jail hours away instead of being housed in the city’s brand new jail because there are people in the city and sheriff’s office who see those clients as dollars and cents instead of husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. I cannot imagine not waking up to beg for a homeless client’s release because he will never be able to make a bond, play cat and mouse to hunt down exculpatory discovery that inexplicably hasn’t been turned over, and be humbled by my client’s humility. I cannot imagine not having the bad days filled with tears, ears ringing and head throbbing from being dressed down by a judge, a district attorney, or a client. I cannot imagine not having the good days, the ones where I finally figure out how to mesh with a client’s personality, the ones where the chains are released, the homecomings, and the smiles.

I AM a public defender for the father held for a violent, emotionally charged crime he did not commit whose child died while he was in custody and he needed someone to convince his probation officer to call a judge on the judge’s vacation and then somehow lower the bond enough to get a release, only to have to get the sheriff to bring him back from an unknown city moments before his child’s funeral. I am a public defender for the grandmother facing 20 to life for half a crack rock who cannot go to inpatient treatment because of her hip condition who has spent the better part of 40 years asking for treatment. I am a public defender for the suicidal man who stole lunch-meat so the police would take him to jail so he could get mental health treatment because there isn’t any left in our state and he was too scared to be alone. I am a public defender for the trans client, terrified in jail, who had the backs of the Gideon’s Promise community who helped me get her hormones while incarcerated, and who was brutally murdered within days of release because we live in a city wrought with its own prejudices and a lack of services. I am a public defender for the 17 year old client who was 80 pounds soaking wet who got “lost” in the jail because he kept not being brought to court, who has turned out to be a brilliant drummer and attended a prestigious music school successfully. I am a public defender for the mother who found herself homeless because she so dutifully paid the fines and fees she was terrified to owe to the court and is fighting like hell to get her children back under a roof.

I WILL BE a public defender because I am constantly growing, constantly humbled, and constantly proven that even when we find ourselves beating our heads against a wall, all it takes is the tiniest crack to crumble. I will be a public defender because of clients like a recent trial client, who was facing life, who was practically begged by his family and myself, to take a deal in an emotional case with every odd against it. Even as we begged him to plead with the jury's decision already made, he looked us in the eye and said, "No. I'm not pleading to something I didn't do. See what they have to say." I will be a public defender because he was right. I will be a public defender because sometimes when I don't think I can go on there are clients like him who I am the only voice for, and they remind me of that when I need it the most. I will be a public defender because, like Atticus Finch said, "The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is in the courtroom."

I WILL BE a public defender so that one fewer man is sent to Angola, to become a human long forgotten, known simply by one more pine box in the grounds of an old plantation, years from now. I WILL BE a public defender because we should expect more for our fellow citizens of New Orleans. I WILL be a public defender because every human being in this system is someone's someone, and if he isn't, he's about to be my someone. I will be a public defender because Clarence Earl Gideon's headstone reads: "Each era finds an improvement in law for the benefit of mankind." I will be a public defender because I am keeping Gideon's promise, today and always.

Gideon's Gifts

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