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Gideon's Promise Class of 2015

Dear Friend of Gideon's Promise,

My foot left the gravel road and hit the cement curb. Then it hit my chest, the feeling you get from the sudden realization that what you are doing is what you are meant to be doing. That gravel road lead from the trailer of the Public Defender's Office to the sole courtroom on the Hopi reservation. It was my first day as an intern and I doubted whether I was capable of the numerous roles a public defender must play. All I had wanted was to serve under-represented and under-served populations, to give volume to the voices which systems of power work to dampen. Public defense seemed to be a roundabout means to my justly ends. However, in the moment of clarity, all I could think about was that public defense work hit on all the right notes of my rebellious-lawyering heart. Public defenders exist to help their clients stand up against the chorus of voices - police, prosecutors, judges - who refuse to see them as anything more than a line on the calendar that must be dealt with. That step onto the sidewalk was the first in the million-mile journey of working in indigent defense.

One of the many difficulties of this work is watching the way some private defense attorneys treat their clients. These attorneys have low expectations of their clients which, in turn, leads to clients' having a low expectation of their attorneys. In my jurisdiction, an action as simple as a phone call returned in a timely manner rises above those expectations. One of my first clients was a man born only a week before I, but lived a much different life. He was only a few months sober, still on methadone, and trying to figure out how to get his driver's license out of a state of suspension. Although I was assigned all of his criminal matters, he had already partially-retained a private attorney. This attorney had done nothing except get bi-weekly continuances until the client would be able to fully retain him. By the time I got the case, the client had already been through several of these continuance cycles. It was my first multi-page driving record, but I went over it with a fine tooth comb until I was able to come up with a plan that would result in my client holding a valid driver's license. However, several of the cases given to the private attorney were critical to the deal. After getting permission from the client, I approached the private attorney to allow me to wrap up all the cases into a single deal. This attorney barely remember the client's name and in giving me permission to handle the cases flatly stated, "I don't know why you are bothering to do this for him, he is never going to get his life together." Six months later that client now has his criminal charges dismissed and proudly displays his valid license. Sometimes it doesn't take the most experience, the most knowledge, or the most skill. Sometimes public defense just takes having the most belief in your clients, even when no one else does.

I only know one thing for certain, that being a public defender is the most important work I will do in my life.

- Dee