



Last week, I was privileged to hear a speech by one of the truly brilliant and dynamic heroes of our times, Bryan Stevenson, Esq., founder and Executive Director of Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. I listened carefully as he suggested four steps for changing the world to provide justice for all. What could be more intriguing and desirable? They are:

- 1) Get proximate to people in low-income communities.
- 2) Change the narrative.
- 3) Stay hopeful.
- 4) Don't just do what is comfortable and convenient.

I nodded after I heard each point, and as I listened I could not help but think about VOLS: our staff, our pro bono partners, our community partners and our clients. As Mr. Stevenson described each point and why it was so important, I would ask myself whether we were meeting his challenge, and I was able to answer "yes" on every one. After all, this is what VOLS has done for 35 years. We partner with community organizations to represent low-income New Yorkers who face obstacles in life, often against odds and under circumstances that are unsettling, with the vision of providing hope and legal solutions that have life changing results. Can I say we have changed the world? Certainly, this question is bigger than one organization can achieve, but we are hopeful that our clients continue to feel supported and empowered by the legal assistance they receive from VOLS and the pro bono attorneys who advocate for them.

In honor of National Pro Bono Week, Oct. 21 – 27, 2018, we shine a spotlight on five of our volunteers and their dedication to changing the world one person at a time and making it a more just place for everyone. Our first spotlight is on Tommy Lopez, Esq., Debevoise & Plimpton LLP, and how he incorporates the four themes that Bryan Stevenson promotes. Each day this week, we will spotlight another volunteer, who:

Gets Proximate:

In line with the belief that young people are our future, Maggie Knox devotes substantial volunteer time to help young immigrants achieve or maintain their legal status in the United States. Maggie works directly with the students and acts as a bridge between them, as they face threats levied by a volatile immigration system, and the promising future they are working so

hard to attain. Find out what she learns by being proximate, and how she uses her skills to positively impact the lives of immigrant students in Tuesday's Pro Bono Week Story.

Changes the Narrative:

Executing life planning documents gives the elders we serve the opportunity to make decisions to ensure that their wishes are clear and carried out by the people they trust the most. The future planning we do for seniors also ensures that can stay in their homes as long as possible and allows them access to critical benefits and services. Read about how one volunteer changes the narrative by empowering seniors and their loved ones.

Stays Hopeful:

Hopes and dreams go into starting any business, and become particularly acute when the business owner is low income and may lack the supportive resources to be successful. Working directly with a low-income small business owner, Clara Mak was able to fully grasp her client's "expectations and concerns, which greatly assisted in addressing lease provisions and providing comments on the lease." "It was great to see a small business get up and running (and that I helped in some way), and that it is possible for such small businesses to serve the community and be appreciated in the community." On Thursday, find out how Clara stayed hopeful and provided hope through listening, patience and legal acumen, helping to pave a path for one small business owner.

Gets out of their comfort zone:

By understanding that providing access to justice is not always comfortable, Claire James advises young attorneys to find commonality between themselves and their clients in order to form a connection; one based on trust and a full understanding of what the client wants to achieve. Read about how this volunteer transcends discomfort in order to achieve the best outcomes for her clients.

We thank our volunteers as we proudly celebrate National Pro Bono Week.

All the best,



Marcia Levy

Tommy Lopez, Esq.-Debevoise & Plimpton LLP



Pro bono work is voluntary; it is compassion, and it creates a ripple effect. As Tommy Lopez says, "I know that we can only help one person at a time, one family at a time, but if we keep up this work we are going to improve outcomes for an entire community, for an entire neighborhood, and that's really how you spread justice." Tommy's commitment to his community is evident through his intersectional and pro bono advocacy. As a third-year associate with Debevoise & Plimpton LLP, Tommy works in mergers and acquisitions while also wielding his law degree to help low-income families rise above the adversities that society has dealt them. Tommy's all-encompassing commitment to pro bono work has impacted VOLS' Immigration Project, Children's Project, and Micro-enterprise Project. His contribution to VOLS' work is recognized throughout our office and the clients we serve.

By working alongside his community, Tommy recognizes the complexity of lived experiences. Families' legal issues are not always a quick fix. When working closely with a client, Tommy utilizes a holistic approach to addressing the problems that individuals face. He says, "Whenever I'm able to learn about my client's lives, it becomes easier to address their issues because you see the connections... you see where the root of the problem might actually be, and they trust you more." Focusing on his community, Tommy is a believer in meeting people where they are, whether that's at a Dunkin Donuts in his neighborhood or greeting his past clients on the street. He leverages this proximity to his community to make his clients feel comfortable, giving him the opportunity to understand the depths of their legal problems.

Stereotypes are often used to organize, segregate, and compress the multitude of identities housed within our society. Our media, our Administration, and our assumptions create a barrier to seeing the unique intersection of identities comprising each individual. Through his pro bono work, Tommy works with immigrants on a variety of legal problems from helping young immigrants achieve Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) to aiding families in remaining in their apartments or accessing the public benefits their families are legally entitled to. In the United States right now, the Administration has promoted a narrative about immigrant families being a burden on taxpayers. Tommy rejects this stance: "When you're serving [immigrants] in a legal capacity, you really understand, they're just like you and me... they're working towards the same goal; they are trying to provide as best a life as they can for themselves and their children." Tommy is an advocate for immigrants' defending their rights, and as a dedicated lawyer he continues to push back against this dominant narrative that threatens immigrants' livelihood.

With being a lawyer comes the satisfaction of helping individuals achieve justice; but it also means bearing witness to the "underbelly of some bureaucracies" as Tommy highlights. By acting as a bridge between low-income individuals and the justice system, Tommy finds solace in his role as an educator of legal rights and a proponent of self-advocacy. Understanding that the impact of one person can only provide so much, Tommy is optimistic that his pro bono work can extend beyond the individuals he works with: "So I am hopeful that by touching one family... it will help the community improve at large."

Tommy has navigated a variety of projects and areas of law that are outside his specialty. He is not afraid to seek guidance from supporters like VOLS and his advisors at Debevoise when handling legal problems outside of his expertise. These resources not only provide the stability and support he needs but also allows him to work with a diversity of clients. Understanding that he will work as hard as possible to produce the best outcome, and that any legal assistance is better than standing in a courtroom alone, he is confident in his ability to support his clients while growing as a lawyer. Although it can be unfamiliar to work with people who have a different background from your own, Tommy notes: "I think you have to put yourself in your client's shoes... you can become a better attorney if you really try and understand things from their perspective. But that doesn't happen until you open yourself up to those different perspectives and it's very humbling to do so." Volunteers of Legal Service is so thankful for Tommy Lopez's pro bono contribution along with all of our wonderful volunteers.

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