

LETTER TO A YOUNG PUBLIC INTEREST ATTORNEY

Andrea Ramos

“Straight ahead of him, nobody can go very far . . . “
Antoine de Saint-Exupery,
The Little Prince

I don't have a fascinating or magical story about my career. But, as a seasoned lawyer who graduated before laptop computers, smart phones, email and the Internet – I can offer some advice. I share my story primarily to show that career choices are not always clear and your journey may be full of surprises. There is no one way or right way. It is your path and your life. You need to find your true self and pursue your dreams. No matter what you do or where you work, remember to keep some very basic things in mind: be nice, find mentors, learn, engage, and have fun.

My path to public interest work was not straight; it was filled with twists and turns. I went to law school with a desire to help others, but I didn't know what that meant in practical terms. I did not have a solid understanding of public interest job opportunities and did not have mentors to guide me. Luckily, law school changed that.

As a young law student, I worked on various public interest projects. My most significant and memorable experience was participating in my law school's clinical program, the Post-Conviction Justice Project. I was fortunate to meet a second year student who encouraged me to apply to the program, and more importantly, shared her experience with me. She was my first mentor and helped change my life. I was hired as a clinic supervisor and worked in Post-Conviction during the summer after my first year and into my second year. I worked closely and under the direct supervision of clinical professors. I finally had the chance to talk with, and engage with, my professors. I learned practical legal skills, improved my writing, and met real clients. I made great friends and enjoyed the experience. This was a turning point for me because I finally felt a connection to law school and the legal community.

My path, however, was not linear. My next position was as a summer associate, and later, as a litigation associate at a medium size law firm. After graduation, I spent my first five years as a litigator. I worked long hours and learned an incredible amount. I was again fortunate to have found mentors, and met wonderful people who became my close friends. I really learned how to write, research, and juggle a caseload.

While I was at the firm I also worked on pro bono cases. Through my pro bono work, I experimented with different areas of practice such as consumer law, wills and trusts, immigration, and guardianships. I volunteered with nonprofit agencies, met public interest lawyers, and learned about the field. I made connections.

Though I valued my time at the firm, I knew I had to make a change. I began looking for a job in public interest but it was not easy. I had worked on pro bono cases, but did not have expertise in a specific area. My friends pushed me to keep searching. My mentors became my job references. After a long search process, I was hired as a staff attorney with the Children's Rights Project at Public Counsel Law Center. I did not have any juvenile law experience, but I had five-years-experience as a litigator, and was a quick learner. I was thrilled. I took a major pay cut, but it did not bother me at all. I drove an old car and did not lead a fancy lifestyle. I remember telling one of my new co-workers that I went to work each day with a permanent smile. He laughed, but it was true. My life changed dramatically. I entered a new world of like-minded lawyers, social workers, and advocates. I found a community of people who shared my vision of social justice.

I worked at Public Counsel for eleven years. I started as a staff attorney, then became a senior staff attorney, and eventually became the Directing Attorney of the Children's Rights Project. I found myself becoming a mentor to others. I loved teaching and sharing my experience. I made great friends. We supported each other, learned from each other, had fun working together, and were fully committed to our mission of helping children and families.

At first I ran Teen Legal Clinics at local high schools. The student-clients often sought advice about how to obtain a social security number so they could apply to college. The answer depended on their immigration status. It was the first time they learned about their status, and sadly, about the lack of avenues for immigration relief. At that time, an undocumented student could attend college, but had to pay out-of-state tuition. That usually meant they could not pursue their dreams of higher education, which was heartbreaking.

I was drawn to immigration work. No matter what I did for my clients, their lives were not stable without a fix to their immigration status. I learned about immigration laws through Public Counsel attorneys who were generous with their time and willing to teach and guide me. I worked on California legislation to change the law and allow undocumented students pay in-state tuition. My Teen Legal Clinic clients testified at legislative hearings and shared their stories. They were the early DREAMers even though they didn't know it. They changed my life.

I am now the Director of the Immigration Law Clinic at Southwestern Law School. This position has given me an incredible opportunity to create and develop a law school clinic. I focus my work on immigration relief for children and survivors of domestic violence and crimes. I have the privilege of serving clients and working with passionate law students. I feel fortunate to have the best of both worlds. I continue to help people in need and teach.

I have learned so much from all of my experiences and value each friend and mentor along the way. My students, clients, and loved ones have inspired me to be a better person and lawyer. But, as I mentioned earlier, my path was not always clear. I often struggled and questioned my decisions. I pushed myself along. As you embark on your career, try your best to embrace each challenge and stay true to yourself.

Sincerely,

Andrea Ramos