

LETTER TO A YOUNG PUBLIC INTEREST ATTORNEY

*Dan Stormer**

Writing this letter is very much of an honor for me. I vividly remember this comparable time in my life when I was graduating from law school and exploring what my future would be. Of course, the landscape in the early 1970's was much different than today. The idea of a career as a "public interest lawyer" had not been developed. The U.S. Supreme Court had rejected the idea of the private Attorney General legal fee award; the Legal Services Corporation had not yet been formed. There were, to be sure, many legal services programs scattered about the country, many receiving their funding from the Office of Equal Opportunity or local public agencies. But a national support system of legal services for the poor was a dream yet to be implemented. We could do good work, but getting paid for it was not the norm. On the day of my graduation, I could not look forward and say, this will be my career.

The lack of a legal services system meant it was hard to find mentors and teachers for doing progressive legal work. What we thought of as a civil rights lawyer was most often a criminal defense

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attorney. Our heroes of the time were people like Ben Margolis and John McTernan, who had fought the House on Un-American Activities (HUAC) during the McCarthy era and who were among the founders of the National Lawyers Guild; other contemporaries of theirs include Leonard Boudin and Victor Rabinowitz. Closer to our generation we learned from attorneys like William Kuntzler and Leonard Weinglass, who represented the Chicago Seven as well as civil rights workers in the turbulent late sixties in the South.

When I graduated, finding a job held two meanings: 1) I would be working for money, and 2) I hoped to find work that would lead to a career I wanted (even if this path had no name). Compared to today's graduates, I was relatively free of debt. Growing up in an extremely poor family, I started working at age 13, worked through high school, college and law school, and then did a drafted stint in the Army. Along with my ability to work hard, I had received some scholarships. I was fortunate in that this allowed me to look for work I wanted to do, not work I had to do. I was also lucky because there is an aspect of my personality that really helped in my career choices: I cannot do things I don't like.

So, after graduation I looked for work that I wanted to do and didn't think about how much I would be paid, as long as it was something. I started working as a public defender in Colorado, followed by several years representing migrant farmworkers, followed by several years representing prisoners at the state penitentiary in Washington, and then I spent time representing rural Native Americans and more farmworkers. In 1980 I came to Los Angeles and spent three years engaged in large scale litigation on behalf of poor people at the Western Center on Law and Poverty.

Each of these jobs built on the prior one. The first two gave me a lot of trial experience. Representing prisoners forced me to develop my writing skills for appeals, writs and extensive coalition litigation. A job as Director of Litigation honed my extremely (still) limited administrative skills. The cases at the Western Center introduced me to large, class action litigation.

In 1984 I set out on my own to see how much more I could do, hoping the freedom of private practice would allow me to expand even further. For the next seven years, the private firm of Litt &

Stormer focused on civil and constitutional rights. And since 1991, Hadsell & Stormer (now Hadsell Stormer Keeny Richardson & Renick) has focused on civil, constitutional and international human rights.

I have had a wonderful career. I cannot remember a day when I was not both proud and happy to go to work. Things others describe as sacrifices are, to me, only distractions. I was not motivated by money, although I'm pleased for my family that I've done well. The lure of a prestigious firm, a judicial appointment, government office—none of these ever held any interest for me. Most were my idea of daily hell. What has made me happy these last thirty-some-odd years is that I could get up in the morning, go to work—and someone would benefit because of that.

So, my advice to those of you thinking of a career in public interest law is simple. Go do it. Do it because you like it, because you care about it, because it's what gets you going in the morning. You can make change. Some of it may be large, systemic shifts in our society that we desperately need. Some of it may right a wrong or correct an injustice in the life of just one person. But all of it is connected and all of it is important.

When the Legal Services Corporation was founded, many, many people in my age group gravitated into it. It was fun, it was exciting, but it was hard. Early on, many judges were not only not sympathetic, they were downright mean and nasty, especially regarding civil cases with the poor. They did not believe in lawyers representing the poor and couldn't understand why "bright" young attorneys would be doing this. Some attorneys didn't make it; they became cynical and left.

During the 70's, there was a saying: "fight cynicism." I cannot stress enough how important this is. Becoming cynical is the demon of a young lawyer's commitment. It causes you to disbelieve in your ability to help others. It causes you to become morally ambivalent. It is self-defeating; if you become a public interest attorney, you must commit to not allowing cynicism to win.

I love the work I do. I am surrounded by friends and colleagues who are so impressive on so many levels. We provide support and

community to one another and hope that the totality of our work will always be a greater than the sum of our individual parts.

If you are interested in joining us, we welcome you with open arms.

Sincerely,

Dan Stormer