

LETTER TO A YOUNG PUBLIC INTEREST ATTORNEY

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Right off the bat, I should let you in on my dark, dirty secret – when I first started law school, I did not plan on being a public interest attorney. Quite the opposite, in fact. My brother, who graduated from law school a few years before I enrolled at Loyola, had been working as a public interest attorney with a local non-profit agency. Seeing how hard he worked and how little money he made, I resolved to do the complete opposite. First of all, I wanted to make money. Secondly, I wanted to do so while working for an entertainment law firm, or any other large downtown law firm.

You see, before I went to law school, I had a very different life. Unlike many of my colleagues, I was not pursuing volunteer opportunities with grassroots community organizations or anything of that nature. I was working as a freelance entertainment journalist, interviewing bands and going to multiple concerts each week. I also worked for a videogame company and I had some fun working as a DJ at local dive bars. Clearly, I had a very different way of life than most individuals seeking a career in public interest law. As such, I thought that pursuing some sort of career in entertainment law made the most sense. If that did not happen, I thought I could pursue some kind of gig at a “big law firm” as a back-up option. That shows how little I knew about the world of law school. Nonetheless, I did not have a particular aversion to public interest law at the time. I knew it to be honorable work and a necessarily in this day and age. I just thought that it was a career path for those much more honorable than I.

However, then something happened that I had not anticipated, something that changed everything – I experienced my first day at law school. My classes were not what I thought they would be. I was introduced to all types of new words that my word processor still informs me do not exist in the real world. I was introduced to people who were more cut-throat and intense than I had ever known before. Additionally, I had to read case law that was as indecipherable to me as my first reading of *The Canterbury Tales* (but at least *The Canterbury Tales* proved a much more enjoyable read than *Palsgraff*). I then spent countless nights staying up late, IRAC-ing cases like there was no tomorrow, and pretending that doing so might help me ace my exam. All the while, I kept telling myself that that was what I had to do; I had to pay my dues in order to become the entertainment lawyer I wanted to be.

In the back of my mind, however, a feeling of disillusionment began to grow. I started to wonder whether the hell through which I was putting myself was worth it. It did not help that entertainment law was all contract-based and contracts proved to be one of my least favorite

classes. Consequently, my aspirations began to crumble before me. I was faced with two options: drop out of school or try to find another legal career path. Both options were easier said than done.

So, I did the only thing that made sense to me at the time, I asked someone what I should do. Fortunately, there was already someone in my life who had experienced the same dilemma, my brother, the public interest attorney. I spoke to him about the problems he faced as a student and how he ultimately decided that he wanted to be a public interest attorney. As it turns out, he faced the same issues I did. How did he find his way? As a first-year student in law school, he started to go to various law student groups, in hopes of finding something that spoke to him. What he found was his high school's Public Interest Law Foundation. As a member, he sought out a volunteer opportunity at a local non-profit. He went on to tell me that pursuing a career as a public interest attorney was the only thing that made sense to him at the time, that it helped validate the trials and tribulations he experienced as a student.

After speaking to my brother, I was not completely sold on the idea of working in the public interest field. However, I figured that I had nothing to lose by going to a few Public Interest Law Foundation meetings. When I went to my first meeting, though, something interesting happened. I met good, decent people. I met people who were not interested in being at the top of their class; they were not gunning to impress their professors by talking their ears off at every opportunity. They actually wanted to do something meaningful during their time in law school. To that end, I also discovered that though I had only been attending law school for a few months, the little knowledge I did possess was enough to do some good for other people with real problems. With this in mind, I decided to go one step further and actually start volunteering for a non-profit agency. I choose to work for the non-profit where my brother worked. I figured that if I were to follow in my brother's footsteps, I might as well follow the path he had already forged. Call it lazy, but cue to seven years later and here I am, writing this letter.

The agency was called Los Angeles Center for Law and Justice. There, at an eviction defense clinic, I interviewed desperate individuals hoping to hold on to their homes. Many times, not even an attorney could do much to help these people and I was only in my first year of law school. Frequently, it seemed these individuals were happy that there was somebody willing to listen to them talk about their problems, even if there was nothing that we could do to help them. I was completely humbled by the experience. I came to view my previous aspirations as meaningless in light of the stories I heard from the clients I was meeting. Suddenly, being an entertainment attorney did not seem like the bees' knees. Rather, it seemed like a fairly empty way to make one's career.

After that, I began to pursue other volunteer opportunities with various non-profits and I became more active with Loyola's Public Interest Law Foundation. I eventually became the foundation's

Co-Chair. Although I was not a fan of going to classes and subjecting myself to learning the rules of vicarious liability or the interstate commerce clause, I no longer felt quite so disillusioned. By the time it came time to find summer employment, I knew that I did not want to work at a stuffy law firm. I knew that if I wanted to have a meaningful summer experience, I needed to pursue an internship with a non-profit agency.

However, I then hit another roadblock. To put it bluntly, my resume stank. Although my recent volunteering certainly helped, the rest of my work history proved to be a big turn-off for most employers. I found myself spending a majority of my interviews justifying my time spent in the entertainment industry rather than speaking about my desire to work in the public interest sector. I soon found myself receiving rejection after rejection. Just as soon as I began to feel a sense of validation as a result of my decision to pursue a career in public interest, the rejection I faced cast doubt on how valid my feelings were. Summer was quickly approaching and my anxiety increased with each passing day. I did not give up though; I could not give up. I'd already given up one career path and I could not give up another within the same year. I kept going to interviews, in the hopes that some agency was as desperate for interns as I was for a job.

Eventually, fate brought me to an interview with Neighborhood Legal Services. As Neighborhood Legal Services was one of the largest non-profit agencies in the state, I went in with low expectations. The interview started with the same question I received from others: "Why did I want to work with a non-profit agency when my resume made it seem like entertainment law was my destined path?" Haven given the same response quite a few times, I answered the question with ease. I gave my interviewer the explanation that I have narrated above. I expected this answer to quickly lead to the end of the interview, but miraculously, something else happened. My interviewer comprehended my answer, actually listened about my transformation, and understood what I experienced. I then received an offer on the spot, an offer I gladly accepted.

Eventually, through different internships and a wider exposure to the legal world, I found my way to my "calling." Currently, I specialize in working with immigrant children in United States immigration detention, particularly abused and abandoned children. As you can imagine, I never envisioned myself working with such a population when I started law school, but, I honestly cannot imagine having a different career path (just how I found myself in this particular career path is a subject for an entirely different article).

I know this piece is meant to be a letter to future public interest attorneys, and thus far it has come across as a rambling biography, a rather uninteresting one at that. For that, I apologize, but when I was asked to write this letter, I thought long and hard of what I could possibly say to someone who has already made up his or her mind about being a public interest attorney. In my experience, if a person has already decided to be a public interest attorney, there is little I can say

to inspire that person to further pursue the path. So, instead, I've written this: a letter to those of you who still do not know that you will be a public interest attorney. I want you to know that, although most everyone comes in to law school with preconceived notions of what kind of lawyer they will be, that does not mean that it is the kind of lawyer they were meant to be. I honestly believed that I was going to be an entertainment lawyer with all of my heart, but that is not who I was meant to be. I was meant to be a public interest attorney – and I'm pretty damn good at it. It just took me a bit longer to realize it.

I've come across a number of students who believe that the only people who will get jobs in the public interest world are those who have devoted life to social justice. I'm proof that that is not necessarily true. It does not matter when one's commitment starts. The only thing that matters is that, at some point, you do commit yourself wholeheartedly. Whether it be in your first, second, or least year of law school, it is never too late to discover that you are a public interest attorney. It does not matter who you were before you started law school. What does matter is who you are when you've finished. While you may find a number of roadblocks on your new path, you should not give up. In truth, these roadblocks will make you work harder and, in the end, they will make you a better attorney.