

LETTER TO A YOUNG PUBLIC INTEREST ATTORNEY

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*Go into the world and do well.
But more importantly, go into the world and do good.*
Minor Meyers Jr.

I commend you for taking it upon yourself to use your legal education to help those in need. I hope you will recruit others to join along with you so we can bridge the justice gap. I feel very privileged to be a part of a community of colleagues that I learn from, collaborate with, and explore ways to meet challenges in the legal profession, such as serving clients, teaching students, and increasing diversity.

My first thoughts are to those who are still in law school:

I strongly encourage you to take advantage of all courses and programs your school has to offer, within and outside of the law school walls, that provide opportunities for you to gain skills, network, and understand the practice of law. For example, when my students teach a Street Law lesson to high school students on ‘know your rights when stopped by a police officer’, they gain a deep and realistic understanding of the fourth amendment. Practical skills involving live clients, cases, and courtroom experiences are beneficial alongside your analytical skills of problem solving and better enable you to be practice-ready. You should participate in legal clinics and take advantage of externship offerings during the academic year as well as during the summer. If you want to receive units for externing at an organization that will provide you the opportunity to learn new skills, but it is not on your school’s approved site list, reach out to the director or administrator and ask about the petition process to add it to that list. In addition to your courses and study groups, you should make time to volunteer together with your classmates. If there is a student organization that focuses on an area in which you are interested, sign up, join the board, help them to fundraise, and add a community service project if there is not one already. If there is not a student group that focuses on immigration, children, family, elder or health care law, or whatever issue you are passionate about, find out how to start a new student group. Take advantage of being a law student and attend lunchtime lectures, panels, discussions, symposium, and guest speaker events. You are very fortunate to have judges, practitioners, and experts come to your campus to offer thought provoking dialogue that will inspire, educate and expose you to new issues, organizations, and possible career paths.

Research and apply for all funding opportunities that you are eligible for, and plan ahead. All schools offer a range of summer grants, awards, and other scholarships for public interest students and graduates. Talk to your public interest department, career services, externship office, legal clinic director, financial aid, and scholarship office about opportunities and deadlines. Make sure to review the application

process closely and follow all the rules. If you need letters of recommendation, ask for them in advance. Some opportunities, such as postgraduate fellowships, have a long application process that requires a great deal of planning, so explore these before your final year of law school. Work on your resume with your career services office, and always keep it up to date with your current activities to be able to send it promptly if needed.

Attend all job fairs, networking events, bar association programs, and interview workshops both at your school, and in the community. Come prepared. Dress professionally, bring your resume or business cards, and do your research before you get there so you can ask thoughtful questions. Don't always expect to get a job offer – rather use these events as an opportunity to gather information, meet new people, and consider where you may want to apply in the future.

Los Angeles is a big city, but the legal community is small. The public interest legal community is even smaller. Therefore you should always be professional, as your reputation is very important. I suggest talking to your professors, adjunct faculty, and alums for advice and staying in touch with your former supervising attorneys, especially after graduation, when you are entering the job market.

To those who have graduated:

Congratulations to you if your experiences in law school have helped you to secure a position in the public interest sector. If you do not have a position yet, do not be discouraged. Opportunities will come. The job search process is a job in itself. It takes time, patience, and attention to detail to be successful in your search. I recommend that graduates volunteer while you are searching, as that can often lead to a position and will keep you engaged in the law. The position may not necessarily be with the organization you are volunteering, but you may meet someone, they may know of something, or an opening may come up, and you will be right there to apply. Plus, when you are in an interview, it is best to say you have been doing something law related, and even better when you are helping others while learning yourself.

Join local bar associations, participate in their events, and attend MCLE's. You will learn and meet lawyers. Law schools, bar associations, and legal aid organizations have special groups for new attorneys. They also usually have special low rates as well, so join and become a member. Many also have mentor programs which I believe are extremely valuable for new attorneys.

Think outside of the box. Look for opportunities outside of traditional lists and mailing or emailing hundreds of resumes. My first few jobs came from knocking on doors and introducing myself to lawyers while I was observing court and attending trainings. Be thorough yet thoughtful in your search. Apply for positions that interest you, that you have qualifications for, but where you can offer the organization, office, or firm something in return. If you really want to work in public interest, but there are no openings, seek and accept a position where you will learn legal skills that are transferrable to the public interest community. However, give your all to your employer; you should work hard, and try your best to learn as much as you can. Then when the time is right, you can search again. It is usually easier to switch to a new position once you have had a job and have experience.

Stay in touch with your classmates, because they will become your colleagues, and may become your pro bono volunteers, your expert counsel, and your inspiration. Now that I have been out of school for 20+ years, my classmates are Judges, Executive Directors, Partners, and Board Presidents. Time goes fast and

experience can be gained quickly after graduation. My former Street Law students are now returning to my classroom as guest speakers and supervising other law students that I send their way. It is important to stay connected, help each other, and work together.

Know that one's career path is not a straight line. Life is what you make of it, and being creative is welcomed, even in our profession. After many years of practicing in dependency court, I wanted to help youth that were not reunifying with their families to learn vital information that would benefit them as they transitioned to adulthood. I reached out to my law professor who connected me to Street Law Inc. in Washington DC. I then designed and implemented a new program, what I call a 'legal life skills class'. I then realized that in order for it to be successful and grow, I needed to transition my career from the courtroom to the classroom. I then worked with colleagues in the legal community outside of the courthouse, and discovered opportunities for me to work with and engage law students to help me reach out to at-risk youth. I thoroughly enjoy teaching Street Law. I have amazing and dedicated law students, who never miss teaching a class and email me at all hours with questions for their students. I try my best to reply to their questions at all hours too, and help them both inside and outside of the classroom. I work hard to keep my energy high, to remain connected to the community, and to know the current legal issues so I can amend my curriculum to meet the needs of our youth. I believe my law students in my Street Law class come away with a better perspective of the 'real world'. They learn to meet their students where they are at in life, a skill that I think is valuable to an attorney. I try to expose my students, and the law student volunteers that I supervise, to a range of legal issues that the youth face, all while learning the importance of giving back to the community.

My hope for all of you is that you will remain passionate and committed to the profession. That you will use your legal knowledge to help those who truly need help. I believe that together we do make a difference.

Sincerely,

Laura Dym Cohen