

LETTER TO A YOUNG PUBLIC INTEREST ATTORNEY

*Victor Narro**

Welcome to the Movimiento!!!

You are now a member of an extended family of progressive lawyers involved with activism and transformation for a better world. In writing this special letter to you, I revisited my own personal journey that began the first day of law school up to the present day.

* Currently a project director for the UCLA Labor Center, Victor has been involved with immigrant rights and labor issues for many years. At the UCLA Downtown Labor Center, Victor Narro's focus is to provide leadership programs for Los Angeles's immigrant workers and internship opportunities for UCLA students. Victor is also a lecturer for the Chicano/a Studies Department, where he teaches classes that focus on immigrant workers and the labor movement. Over the past few years, Victor has worked with janitors, hotel workers, laundry workers, sanitation workers, port truckers, and more recently, car wash workers.

Victor was formerly the co-executive director of Sweatshop Watch. Prior to that, he was the workers' rights project director for the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), where he was involved with organizing day laborers, domestic workers, garment workers, and gardeners. His work in multi-ethnic organizing led to the creation of the Multi-ethnic Immigrant Workers Organizing Network (MIWON) in collaboration with KIWA, Garment Worker Center, and Pilipino Worker Center. Through Victor's leadership, the day laborer project was able to grow into the National Day Laborer Organizing Network that today includes forty community-based worker centers from around the country. Before his tenure at CHIRLA, Victor worked in the Los Angeles regional office of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF).

Victor is co-author of *Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers: Violations of Employment and Labor Laws in America's Cities* (2008), and *Wage Theft and Workplace Violations in Los Angeles* (2010). He is also co-editor of a recent book, *Working for Justice: The L.A. Model of Organizing and Advocacy* (Cornell University Press, 2010). In 2005, Victor was appointed by L.A. Mayor Villaraigosa to the Police Permit Review Panel of the Los Angeles Police Commission, where he served until 2010.

It has been a great and rewarding journey filled with challenges and hope, but always with a strong commitment to continuing the struggle for a better tomorrow for working immigrant families. Through all my campaign and policy efforts over the past 20 years to protect the rights of day laborers, carwash workers, domestic workers, janitors, hotel workers, restaurant workers and immigrant students, I have lived through experiences that have embodied my faith in a just society for all.

As I wrote this letter, I thought of so many different ways to pass on my special words to you. There is a whole body of great literature out there about the role of progressive lawyers in the movement and you should read a few good articles before you begin your path. By now, you will have received great advice and words of wisdom from great lawyers in the movement, and you should heed their words. Instead of repeating what you may have already heard, I want to share with you what I see as the “spirituality” of being a people’s lawyer.

What I decided to do is to lay out my own guiding principles that have helped to shape me as a legal advocate and activist. These principles have become my moral compass in my daily work with immigrant workers, especially during the challenging moments that come up in organizing campaigns and policy work. I share these principles with you in the highest spirit of solidarity and friendship.

1. KNOW YOUR PURPOSE IN LIFE SO YOU CAN LIVE AND LEAD FROM IT TO GIVE YOUR LIFE MEANING.

Before I started law school, I defined my purpose in life based on my years as a student activist fighting for the rights of immigrant families: *To fight for dignity and justice for others through a life of activism filled with humility and simplicity.*

I was the only Latino student in my entering law school class in 1988 at the University of Richmond Law School in Virginia. I

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was never a good test taker, having taken the LSAT six times over a two year period, and the feeling of self doubt, or “el NO” was deep within me. I had no knowledge at all about the legal system even to its most basic level. There were no lawyers or judges in my family who could provide me with pre-law school preparation. The first day that I entered law school, I was reminded of the isolation and pressure placed upon me when one of my classmates commented to me that I took the place of one of his close friends because of the school’s affirmative action policy. I vividly remember walking into my first class, which was Torts, and being called on by my professor. Needless to say, the first week of law school was overwhelming. All I had to get through the ordeal was my Black’s law dictionary and my purpose in life. I survived that first week, and I kept reminding myself during the three years of law school of my purpose and why I was there. Upon graduating from law school, I moved to Los Angeles to work at the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF). I am forever grateful to MALDEF for being the starting point of my 20 year journey as a fighter for immigrant rights.

2. ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR PRIVILEGED STATUS AS A LAWYER AND KNOW THAT TRUE JUSTICE LIES DEEP WITHIN THE HEARTS OF OUR COMMUNITY MEMBERS.

The law in itself is a power dynamic and the legal profession instills in its member a status of privilege. This process of bestowing a privileged status on you began from your first day of law school. Instead of trying to deny this status, you must learn to embrace it, acknowledge it, and never let it control your relationship with your clients. Never let your privileged status overtake you and cause you to believe that you are the smartest person in a room full of organizers, activists, and community members. Always understand that true justice lies not in your knowledge of the laws, but in their hearts and your role is to use the law as a tool for them to fight for their rights for dignity, respect and a better life.

I first learned of this principle during my first job after law school at MALDEF back in 1992. My first assignment was a First Amendment case involving the rights of day laborers to congregate in public areas throughout L.A. County. After a small vocal group of residents complained about a day laborer corner at a Home Depot

shopping center in Ladera Heights, an unincorporated area of L.A. County, MALDEF went to court to defend the right of day laborers to seek work in public places as part of the free speech rights protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

My first visit to that day laborer corner became a lifelong teaching experience. I remember arriving with a bundle of “know your rights” flyers for the workers and I began to lecture them about the laws and their rights. They immediately crumpled up the flyers and began walking away from me. As I stood there dumbfounded by their response, one of the workers named Jeronimo walked up to me and said the following: “You have a law degree and many qualifications to help us, but here you are in the university of life. Here you fight side by side with us against the Sheriff’s deputies and those who want to take our corner away from us. Here you are one of us and not more than us.”

These powerful words helped me to acknowledge my privileged status and to realize that my graduation from law school became my enrollment into this “university of life.” Visiting these workers weekly to get their support for the litigation exposed me to their harassment and mistreatment by Sheriff’s deputies and business owners. This case was the beginning of my efforts over the years to organize day laborers and find ways to improve their lives.

Today, I still go back to this corner periodically to visit my *compañeros* there and learn from them. Jeronimo was also an artist and he gave me one of his paintings of two legs walking barefoot across a large dirt road. That painting which hangs in my office helps remind me of my privileged status and how I must use my legal education and training solely as a weapon in the fight for justice. A few weeks ago, I found out that Jeronimo passed away two years ago. Today, his painting is a daily reminder of why I chose to do the work that I do every day.

3. APPROACH YOUR WORK WITH THE SPIRIT OF CO-POWERMENT AND HUMILITY, ALWAYS PUTTING THE RELATIONSHIP BEFORE THE TASK.

Co-powering is a concept that comes from the Latino community speaking to the responsibility for individual leaders to mindfully work toward supporting the personal power of others through modeling, validating, and feedback. It is a process of developing our

skills to empower each other. We engage in co-powerment communication to consciously confront the negativity that undermines our personal, family and community power. A true co-powerment process reaches the state of what is known as “conocimiento.” There is no English translation for this term, but it basically means “sharing knowledge about each other to know each other.” Too often in our activist work, we put task before relationship. In fact, it needs to be the other way around. Always attend to relationships before starting the task. As a people’s lawyer, you have a great potential to help others achieve co-powerment and shared knowledge so that they can become activist leaders in their struggles.

I can point to countless examples of reaching a level of *conocimiento* and co-powerment in my many years in the immigrant rights and labor movements. The one experience for me that really stands out took place in 1997 when I began my work as the Workers’ Rights Project Director for the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA). The City of Agoura Hills had successfully defended a legal challenge by the ACLU and other civil rights groups to its anti-day laborer ordinance. As a result, the city officials instructed the Sheriff’s Department to begin an aggressive crackdown on day laborers. The organizers at CHIRLA, among my greatest mentors who taught me how to think like an organizer, convinced me to choose Agoura Hills as my first major challenge.

When we first visited the city, the 15 or so day laborers left out of a population that used to be around 100, were hidden in the donut shops and Burger King of a shopping center across the street from where they would look for work on Kanan Road. We began to organize them and joined them in getting harassed ourselves and sometimes chased away by the Sheriff’s deputies. The one experience that I will never forget in this struggle took place on a Saturday, when I was conducting a workshop for the day laborers that focused on their rights when detained or arrested by law enforcement. By that time the group had grown to 40 workers because of our “co-powerment” process with them. Within a matter of minutes during the middle of the workshop, we were surrounded by 10 or so Sheriff’s patrol cars. The workers remained in a circle and I went to the deputies to inquire as to what was going on. The deputy in charge told me that I was free to go, but they would arrest

some of the workers for not having paid previous tickets for violating the anti-day laborer ordinance. I went back into the circle and explained the situation to the workers. The workers told me that I should go, but that they would all remain together as a group. At that moment, I felt a strong feeling of *conocimiento* with the workers. They shared their knowledge with me and empowered me to become united with them in the fight. I then walked towards the deputies and the workers followed behind me as if knowing what was about to happen and they were there to back me up. I told the deputies that I would remain with the group. When the deputy in charge told me that I would risk getting arrested for interfering with their operation, I bowed my head before them, extended my hands to them and instructed them to handcuff me. After a long silent moment, the deputies walked back to their patrol cars and drove away.

This experience and many others like it over the years of my activist work taught me that much of our daily work in the movement is about the fragility of life, dealing with so many lives in the balance, and not knowing what's going on or what will happen next - - but in the end we must rely on our inner strength to believe that Life is inherent in everyone and we should always strive for living in the relationships and achieving shared knowledge about one another.

4. PRACTICE AND INTEGRATE SELF-CARE AND PERSONAL ECOLOGY INTO YOUR LIFE

A public interest lawyer is an activist for social change. Hours can be long and the work can be highly stressful at times. Let's face it, along with your great days and accomplishments, you are going to have those grueling difficult days. If you are involved in a major litigation or campaign, time off on weekends can become non-existent. Always remember that the life of an activist really begins at home. The work itself can be a wear and tear on you physically, mentally and spiritually. Also, it can have a major impact on your family.

Part of your work as a public interest lawyer must involve a balance of self-care and family activism. In the same way that you will be advocating unconditionally for others, you must also do the same for your personal ecology and your family. Create a plan of self-care that includes regular exercise and relaxing activities for yourself and always prioritize your family on the same level as your

work. By integrating self-care and family activism into your work as a public interest lawyer, you will ensure a long and healthy life as an activist for social justice. Seek and find this balance first before moving forward with anything else.

Welcome again to the family!! I hope this letter finds a special place within your heart. It's been a great journey for me since graduating from law school and if I were to be given a second chance in life on a career path, I would relive the same experiences. I look forward to working side by side with you and learning from you as we fight together for a better tomorrow.

¡Sí Se Puede!
Victor Narro