



PRESIDENT'S PAGE

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It's Just Another Day For You and Me in Paradise

Back when I was a junior IP associate at a big law firm, I took up a *pro bono* case that really changed who I am as an attorney. The big firms encouraged us to take on *pro bono* matters, and at the time, I was nervous about handling them as I only had been doing patent and trademark work. And this was an asylum case, a world apart from what I had been doing. But I quickly became attached to the case and learned so much. My *pro bono* client was a refugee seeking asylum in the United States. He had to flee his home country because, while he served as a doctor for the government's prison, he had witnessed too many incidents where the prisoners were executed and—before they died (which turned out was not so easily defined)—their organs were harvested for use or trade. As a doctor, he found the practice barbaric as many prisoners were still breathing or conscious. He fled his country to whistle-blow for such inhumane practices. By the time I met him, this doctor of medicine who had a job, security, money, and respect, was washing dishes in a crowded restaurant. He lived in fear of being sent back where prosecution, imprisonment, or worse awaited him. His family, all of whom he had to leave behind, already bore consequences for his defiance.

This was not a case I could handle by myself. Thank goodness for legal aid organizations that offer free legal services and partner up with private attorneys. It was a true collaboration, and I learned helping to define a term such as “death” has substantial consequences. The medical term for death can include (1) irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions, or (2) irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem. Ideally for organ donations, the sooner the organ is harvested the more chance for implantation. The question then becomes: when does death occur? His account of seeing people who had cessation of brain function but were still breathing raised the issue of whether they were “dead.” Words matter in law, but in this case, words determined whether lives had been stolen or simply redefined. His government dismissed his claims and painted him as complicit, accusing him of seeking U.S. citizenship for convenience. The stakes could not have been higher.

Ultimately, with the help of the legal aid, he won asylum and began rebuilding his life. My contribution was modest, but the experience shook me. It was the first time I fully grasped that the law could literally mean survival. It deepened my respect for the attorneys who dedicate their entire careers to non-profits by managing crushing caseloads and working for far less pay than private practice lawyers and yet making life-altering differences in people's lives.

Another formative *pro bono* experience happened when I volunteered with the Chicago Chapter of the Constitutional Rights Foundation. I went into an elementary school on the South Side to teach civics and constitutional rights. As someone raised in a predominantly white, middle-class town in Indiana, I thought I understood what it meant to be a minority. I did not. After my cheerful presentation on the three branches of government, the middle schoolers told me, almost matter-of-factly, that they feared the police because “they take daddy away and he never comes back.” Their lived reality was worlds apart from mine, where police were trusted and respected. Reading about Black history was one thing; listening to children share how fear shaped their daily lives was another. That day, I learned the difference between policy and lived experiences.

These experiences reminded me that sitting behind a desk drafting patents and filing trademarks, while important to businesses and innovation, would never teach me what *pro bono* did: perspective, humility, and humanity. *Pro bono* work is not simply a charitable box to check: it is a professional and personal necessity. It can help you develop critical skills like taking depositions, writing briefs, and appearing in court—teachings that may not arise in your regular practice. More importantly, it forces us to confront realities outside our own, and to grow as advocates and people. Ultimately, we are in the service industry, and we need to learn how to truly serve.

In Orange County, we are fortunate to have extraordinary organizations doing this work every day such as **Public Law Center, Community Legal Aid SoCal, Veterans Legal Institute, Elder Law Center, Constitutional Rights Foundation**, and **Project Youth**, to just name a few.

They need us. Our legal aid organizations are overwhelmed by demand and under-resourced to meet it. Every matter, no matter how small, matters to the client. And here's the truth: you, the lawyer, will walk away transformed too.

So I make this promise to you: take a *pro bono* case. Roll up your sleeves, especially if you are sitting comfortably in your own paradise. Join one of our local legal aid efforts. Volunteer in a classroom. You will see the law in its most urgent, human form. And you will discover that while you may give your time and talent, you will receive far more in return.



*Mei Tsang wants you to sign up for a *pro bono* case and share your story at mtsang@uzllp.com.*