

The Importance of Civil Legal Aid Services

The Wisconsin Equal Justice Fund supports three organizations that provide direct civil legal services to people in need.

As an undergraduate, I took whatever courses I fancied. I loved literature, foreign language (Spanish), liberal arts – sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, economics.

They were all so interesting and enriching. After a year abroad in Spain, I returned to the U.W. System for my senior year, and graduated with a major in international relations, minoring in Spanish. Going to law school did not occur to me at that time.

After graduation, my partner (later husband) was accepted into a graduate program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and here we were. I had no specific intention or plan for a career. I started looking for a decent job and found that they were not so easy to come by in this town.

A Whole New World

Finally, I landed a job as a paralegal at Legal Action of Wisconsin, working in the Migrant Project. A whole new world. Despite growing up in Wisconsin, I never knew about the thousands of farmworkers who traveled to the state every year for weeks or months at a time to help with the harvesting of cucumbers, cherries, and other fruits and vegetables.

The farmworker families I routinely met with were kind, hard-working folks who earned a pittance and lived on a shoestring. They were also vulnerable to exploitation.

They needed help with many routine legal issues and some extraordinary legal issues that appeared insurmountable for them due to language barriers, economic obstacles, and cultural differences. I soon realized that my team made a difference. The farmworkers were so grateful for our

presence, let alone our assistance. I had found my calling.

Fast forward – through law school, marriage, a baby, and a husband still working on his Ph.D. – and instead of pursuing public interest law, which was my original plan, I found myself practicing litigation at a large law firm. The rest is history.

Wisconsin Equal Justice Fund: Making a Difference

I have not come full circle (yet). I am still in private practice. But I make a difference by serving on the board of the Wisconsin Equal Justice Fund.

This organization has a singular goal: We raise money for our three service organizations – Legal Action of Wisconsin, Judicare Legal Aid, and Disability Rights Wisconsin – which are out there every day helping farmworkers and other folks with low incomes who need legal help.

I am in awe of all they do, day after day, week after week, and year after year. These attorneys and their staff devote their limited resources, and importantly, their time, energy, intelligence, and empathy to the thousands of people in our communities who are in dire need of legal assistance.

I am not doing that day-to-day work. I can help, however, by contributing funds to these organizations. I know those legal aid heroes never have enough funds to serve all Wisconsinites in need because that need is so great and never ceases. I encourage all of us in private practice to do our part to help.

To learn more about the Wisconsin Equal Justice Fund and how you can help, please visit WEJF.org. **WL**

BY MARTA T. MEYERS

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