



We Can Be Heroes

by Justina Uram-Mubangu

I'll never forget the first time I held her. She was very tiny, so I was a little nervous. Then, she looked up at me with angelic blue eyes and smiled. My heart melted. I knew I was tasked with an important duty and I couldn't let her down.

My very first client, an infant, was abused then abandoned by her mother, a prostitute. I was so taken aback by her sheer helplessness that the usual excuses many of us make to distance ourselves from pro bono service didn't have a chance to cross my mind. I felt like a superhero. How could I not take her case?

Later, though, when I was alone, the fears and excuses crept up on me.

"What if I mess this up?"

"What if I don't know what to do? Who's going to help me?"

"How much time is this going to actually take?"

"Maybe I can still say no?"

When I saw my little client again, the excuses faded away. This was a no brainer. She was a baby. How could she possibly represent herself? And what kind of person would I be if I turned my back on her?

Her case ended up being sort of...easy. Not only that, it resolved positively. I was surprised. “Did I help save a baby?”

I gained some confidence and decided to take the pro bono case of another child, a victim of incest. When I met her, she seemed so innocent, despite years of being raped by her brothers. I knew that I couldn’t let her down and I got that superhero feeling again.

That night, I lay awake staring at the ceiling fan above my bed, worried that her case would be difficult, emotionally draining, and time consuming. It turned out being all those things, but once I was actually in the thick of it, my worries faded away. My desire to serve my client outweighed all the excuses I could conjure up. When the case finally ended, I felt really good because my client was safe. Again, I was surprised.

“Did I just help save a kid?”

Sometimes, I still lay awake at night, staring at the ceiling fan, now thinking about the horrors my little client endured. I guess that case got to me.

My third case was a toddler who was left parentless after a natural disaster. She touched my heart the most. I’ll never forget running through Baltimore in a torrential downpour, carrying my little client in one arm and my files and umbrella in the other, praying we would make it to our hearing on time. She laughed and screamed the whole while. Before that, I hadn’t realized how heavy a 3-year-old could be.

With each case I took, the more my heart was touched and the more my life was transformed. Soon, I realized a growing desire to devote my profession to helping vulnerable people of all ages, and assist colleagues in their endeavors to change lives, and themselves, through pro bono. Since then, I’ve seen and counseled many clients, and not all have been as

Editor’s note

If you are not currently participating in a pro bono program and would like to volunteer, Karl Doss, the VSB Director of Access to Legal Services, will assist you in locating pro bono opportunities in your areas of interest. You can reach Mr. Doss at doss@vsb.org or by calling (804) 775-0522.

touching as the first three cases of my career. But I will tell you, it doesn’t matter if your client is a tiny baby, a single mom, a scared immigrant, or a senior citizen — all are vulnerable, all our fellow human beings, and all can have their lives drastically impacted by attorneys.

We are among the most educated, affluent, and powerful people in our nation simply because we have been afforded the training and ability to read, write, discern, and advocate. Most days, I don’t think we realize how fortunate we are, or how much influence we hold.

Every attorney can be a superhero. We just have to be willing to share a fragment of ourselves.

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