

I learned at an early age what it felt like to be shunned for circumstances outside of my control. I also learned that the kindness of a stranger could go a long way. When my father, a state trooper, was arrested for distribution of narcotics, I learned that some people would hold my father's mistakes against me. However, I chose not to dwell on those that judged my family unfairly, focusing instead on the kindness of a few. I decided to volunteer in my own community, easing the suffering of other children like myself. In essence, I would pay it forward. I joined the Girl Scouts, an inclusive organization, which embraced girls of all ages, colors and backgrounds. The Girl Scouts would ignite my love affair with community service.

At American University, I continued to feed my passion for service. I volunteered as a teacher's aide at the Potomac Lighthouse Public Charter School in Washington, DC. When the teacher called out sick I was informed that I would have to teach the class. Without lesson plans, I was forced to teach creatively. From this experience I realized how desperately the school needed substitute lesson plans. Therefore, I led a team of college peers that created two lesson plans for each of the five subjects taught in each grade. In addition, we created worksheets, projects and an interactive CD for Spanish learning, which we recorded at AU's music studio.

After graduating college, I realized "service" was an integral part of my life. Rutgers Camden was the perfect fit. I am in the state I want to practice, at a school that prides itself on community service. Since joining Rutgers I have immersed myself in organizations geared toward serving our community in a leadership capacity. I was elected vice president of the Women's Law Caucus, sitting as co-chair of the Mary Philbrook Committee. The goal of Philbrook is to honor alumni, 3L students and others

in the community who have made exemplary strides in public interest work. The award is aptly named after the first female admitted to the New Jersey bar who then used her legal training for the advancement of women's rights.

I also assist with the Caucus' Dare 2 Care Program, which is designed to help young females in the City of Camden successfully matriculate into college. Through college application seminars, resume workshops, and tea talks, I have helped young women in Camden work toward their goal of achieving higher education. Through Dare 2 Care, I met and assisted a young woman who now attends Rowan University. I continue to mentor Tikeena and I am now guiding her in the quest of her dream job: becoming a detective. I am also a Marshall Brennan Fellow and participate in Street Law. As part of my fellowship I teach constitutional law to high school students in Camden and through Street Law I teach juveniles in the youth detention center. I also serve as the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association liaison to Rutgers – Camden, where I help female law students connect with the women lawyers of New Jersey.

My desire to help others started at a young age. I do not have memories of an idyllic relationship between my parents; rather I have memories of verbal fights escalating to physical altercations, scrambling into my mother's arms when my father got in her face, and hysterically screaming at my father to get off of my brother when things became violent. After my father went to prison, I watched my mother struggle to support her children. My mother worked multiple jobs to pay for household expenses and repay the debts my father saddled her with. The loans my father took to gamble, legal fees amassed during trial, and fines accrued at conviction, were all paid through the jobs my

mother took-on. Yet it would be another six years before my mother would be legally free from my father.

My father refused to pay child support because he believed the money benefited my mother. It took years for my mother to get the court to automatically deduct the monies from my father's paycheck. Once the deductions finally started taking effect, my father either reduced his hours at work so he would pay less child support or worked off the books so he could claim he had no funds with which to pay the child support. My mother worked two to three jobs until I graduated high school to make sure my brother and I had everything we needed. And to this day, she is still paying off a loan my father took from her uncle.

I have seen the effects of an abusive husband on the wife and children. I have seen the havoc wreaked by a parent with substance abuse problems. I was fortunate to have a mother with the wherewithal to research the law and learn how to use the legal system to remove her family from a negative situation. However, I am acutely aware that my mother is in the minority. The majority of women do not know where to turn when they need to leave an abusive relationship, divorce their spouse or protect their children. Volunteering has always been an integral part of my life, but it was not until law school that I realized I could help women like my mother, and children similarly situated to the child version of myself, in an even greater capacity: legal assistance. I already mentor young women, but my law degree, partly funded through a scholarship from the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association, will enable me to help women on a much greater scale. I can tell you that moral support is necessary for a woman to leave behind an abusive spouse, but without the legal means to do so, she will remain tied to her abuser. I

plan to use my law degree to help women like my mother sever their relationships with an abusive significant other and protect their children. I will utilize my personal experiences in combination with my law degree to help women end the cycle of abuse.

I joined the Girl Scouts in order to pay forward the kindness another scout bestowed upon my family during the holidays over twenty years ago. The Girl Scouts taught me the motto, “We leave places better than we found them.” My mother taught me to be a strong advocate for myself and those without a voice. Law school armed me with the tools to legally advocate for the women and children emerging from abuse. And I will use everything I learned from the Girl Scouts, my mother, and law school to help women navigate legal waters during their separation from an abusive spouse, and in the fight for child support.

In reflecting on my volunteer work thus far, I never stopped paying it forward. Adversity and public interest have been the themes throughout my life, teaching me invaluable skills that I will certainly utilize as an attorney. As a young child I learned that a little kindness will go a long way. I learned that everything worth accomplishing will take hard work. My mother is the reason behind my strength and I know that if she did not make the choice to leave my father and fight for her children, I would not be the person I am today. Through pro bono work I want to give abused women the courage to do what my mother did: be a strong advocate for herself and her children. While I may not know what area of law I want to practice, I am positive that my goal as an attorney will always be to leave those that I touch better than I found them.