

**PAYING IT FORWARD:
A Law Degree as a Tool on the Path Toward Justice**

As a woman from a working-class, immigrant community, I have witnessed great women – community organizers, teachers, social workers, lawyers, and ministers, to name just a few – lead our community on a wise, compassionate, path toward justice. I have also witnessed courageous women overcome the effects of domestic violence, sexual abuse trauma, and discrimination. As a partner on the path to justice and as a mentee, I learned a great deal from these women, some of whom are members of the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association. Each woman's tutelage contributed to the woman I am today and to the woman I am becoming. Out of gratitude and in solidarity, I pay forward their gifts to me. I will continue to do so once I earn my law degree.

For me, becoming an attorney means representing members of vulnerable communities and ensuring that their voices are heard. It means the blessing of great privilege and the responsibility to use that privilege for the benefit of the whole. While several teachers and mentors encouraged me to pursue a career in the law, my immigrant status and my naiveté of financial aid programs made law school seem unattainable. It wasn't until I met Latina law students and lawyers that I finally realized I too could pursue my dream. Once I become a lawyer, I will use both my legal skills and mentorship skills to ensure other women are aware of the resources available to make their own dreams a reality.

Prior to law school, I was a Youth Case Manager and a Crisis Intervention Specialist with Family Intervention Services. In that capacity, I often worked with women and children that survived domestic violence. I served as an interpreter for immigrant women escaping life-threatening situations, linked families to community resources and therapeutic services, and educated clients about the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). In turn, the women I worked

with taught me about survival, sacrifice, and perseverance. Witnessing their courage inspired me to overcome barriers in my personal life and to pursue a degree in the law.

As a Youth Case Manager, I also conducted assessments, provided referrals, and maintained connections with girls and young women in the foster care system and the juvenile justice system. Listening to the trauma the girls and young women described, then guiding them through various parts of the child protection services system, posed some of the greatest professional challenges I have ever faced. I shared in their anger at the injustice of a system that at times criminalized the very coping skills the girls used to overcome sexual abuse trauma. Their strength to speak out about sexual abuse history, an occurrence that many keep silent, was truly inspiring. The work of the Public Defender, Patricia Kay, who represented the adolescent girls accused of delinquency, and of the attorneys at Deirdre's House, the center for Morris County's child victims of abuse, influenced me to pursue a law degree. These were the first women lawyers I ever met and the first to show me a social justice perspective in the legal field.

During my first summer as a law student, I was honored to work with women leaders in the field of human trafficking prevention and prosecution. The research assistant position with the Human Trafficking Prevention and Prosecution Project, funded by the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office, allowed me to apply my knowledge of the Domestic Violence Wheel, sexual abuse trauma, VAWA, and the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) to the work of reforming legal practices regarding human trafficking. I was inspired by the dedication and care with which prosecutors throughout the state advocated for tougher laws to protect victims of labor and sex trafficking. Throughout the program, I learned not only from the all-women team that supervised me, but also from the legal interns on the project, many also women. Just as encouraging was the dedication of the organizers and survivors that supported women escaping

from lives of servitude. This was my first position in the legal field, and it affirmed my resolve to use my law degree to fight injustices against the most vulnerable in our communities.

As a member of the Seton Hall School of Law Women's Law Forum, I had the honor of leading the 2013 "Take Back The Night" March, during which Rutgers University School of Law students and Seton Hall University School of Law students rallied through Newark to raise awareness about human trafficking, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. Halfway through the march, I offered the megaphone to a fellow student, partly because my throat was sore from chanting, and partly because I believed she would add a new element to the march. She accepted the megaphone and continued leading the march, with a stronger and more rhythmic voice than mine. At the end of the march, she thanked me and shared with me her feelings of empowerment as she led the march, especially given the very sensitive and personal subject matter. This is just one more example of the way women support one another in social movements, in law school, and in the legal field. Once I become a licensed attorney, I plan to provide pro bono representation for indigent and working-class survivors of human trafficking, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. I will continue working with women as a team, supporting one another as we excel. I plan to keep working with women's groups that provide the space for discussions about the challenges women face, followed by concrete plans of action for reform.

The women that helped me to overcome my own challenges and that mentored me on my path to law school also taught me to become a mentor for other women. Diana Mejia, The Wind of The Spirit Immigrant Resource Center co-founder, taught me that the greatest leaders know how to follow and develop new leaders along the way. After completing my undergraduate degree at Drew University, I followed Diana's advice and became a mentor to high school students in The Educational Center's ESCUCHA! Program. Part of the goal of the ESCUCHA!

Program, which means “Listen!” in Spanish, is to mentor high school youth on the road to becoming first-generation college students and develop community leaders. I have maintained relationships with some of those ESCUCHA! Students, who are now on University Dean’s lists or have since graduated from New Jersey Institute of Technology, Rutgers University, and John Jay University. I continued my work with the mentorship program even as a law student and developed a pipeline program to expose the ESCUCHA! Students to law school. Some of those same aspiring first-generation college students are now planning law careers. I learn as much from my mentees as they learn from me, and I will continue volunteering with the ESCUCHA! Program once I am an attorney.

In addition to continued mentorship, I plan to continue promoting the advancement of women once I become an attorney. As a community organizer in the movement to pass the NJ DREAM Act, a law that ended the discriminatory practice of charging discriminatory tuition rates to tax-paying New Jersey residents based on their immigrant status, I supported the development of leadership skills in young women. At first, I witnessed young women doing the work behind the scenes – organizing rallies, drafting petitions, and lobbying legislators – but it was often the young men that gave statements to the press or made speeches at the rallies. After just a few months, however, the young women in the movement found the strength in their voice to lead the immigrant youth movement. On the day the vote passed in the assembly, my fellow students and I were impressed with Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver. Young women who just a year ago were timid about public speaking, were now contemplating following in Assemblywoman Oliver’s footsteps. The more women leaders our community has, the more young women will aspire to reach new heights.

Finally, once I earn my law degree, I plan to break through barriers that pose challenges for women in leadership positions. I have the privilege of instruction from some of New Jersey's most prestigious women law professors, who blaze the path for current law students to follow, while challenging us to create our own. In addition, I had the great opportunity to present my very first case in the Seton Hall University School of Law Center for Social Justice Immigrant Rights/International Human Rights Clinic before Judge Dorothy Harbeck. Watching a woman on the bench is a reminder of the great possibilities open to me thanks to the ground-breaking work of women that came before me. Thankfully, New Jersey's Women Lawyers Association members provide the example and offer the mentorship I need to reach my goals. Whether I advocate for a class as part of gender equality impact litigation, become an elected official, or provide pro-bono representation to women within a non-profit organization, I will pay forward the blessings I have received.