

Pro Bono – Life changing for law student and client.

With the end of my LLB in sight, I was restless to be giving back in some way. I began by volunteering at a law clinic, which I realised was the perfect activity for W360. It felt good being in a working legal environment. I was looking forward to this opportunity to develop vital personal and professional skills if I was serious about a career in law.

The law clinic helps people in the local community obtain access to justice on a pro bono basis. The clients who attend are often vulnerable and the straightforward advice they receive can be life changing. I must admit, up until this point, I was very naïve in my understanding of the mechanics of pro bono.

Pro bono has played a very important role since the 2012 Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act introduced funding cuts to legal aid. Pro bono is free legal advice provided by lawyers to the public. It is only in light of my participation in my open justice activity that I have developed a true understanding of the value of pro bono legal work.

At the law clinic I witnessed the distress the cuts in legal aid have caused and the lack of social justice available to vulnerable members of society. The volunteer lawyers come from different legal fields including Corporate, Criminal and the Civil Service, but all have one goal. They want to use their legal skills to access social justice for people who have slipped through the net, due to financial means or lack of understanding of the law.

Providing access to legal advice for those who could not otherwise afford it is such a crucial component of a fair justice system. Many legal professionals, law students and academics have a commitment to social justice and believe there is a moral obligation to provide pro bono services.

Keeping an open justice portfolio was a requisite of W360, something I did not value at the time but on reflection I can see how important it is. By recording entries in the portfolio it gave me an understanding of the true context of how pro bono changes people's lives. It puts them on a better path to achieving social justice with the knowledge, legal advice and empowerment the volunteer lawyers have given them.

My most memorable pro bono experience was interviewing a distressed client. The lady's husband had recently died, and his family were making threats. "I was asked to write a chronology for a client this evening. I wanted to do more to help this lady and take away her pain. I was delighted one of our pro bono lawyers would help her in his own time tomorrow." (Extract 1).

I felt my professional identity as a future legal professional was being developed as I interviewed this lady. I had listened and questioned very gently as I was aware this was a very private individual who was only sharing her story with me as she was desperate for help. I felt truly privileged she trusted me and believed I could deliver social justice for her. This experience was life changing for me.

Studying the key themes of professional identity, social justice, legal values and ethics for W360 has shown me that these themes are vital components for a pro bono lawyer. The work at the law clinic took me out of my comfort zone. It opened my eyes to the need for pro bono work and I hope to be able to use this open justice activity as a stepping-stone in the fight for social justice for all.

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Reference list.

Books

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The Open University (2019) W360 Unit 1 Pro bono and access to justice. Available at learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=1546156 (Accessed 8 April 2020).

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Open Justice Portfolio.

Sherry, D. (2020) "Extract 1, originally written 4 February 2020.

Tutorials. (Recorded by The Open University)

Tutorial 2A Reflective Writing - Siobhan McCormack
Available at
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(Accessed 8 April 2020)