

What I learned whilst trying to be a lawyer for 4 months

"How am I feeling? Excited to get started, trepidation working with my group", were the words I wrote in my log after attending a welcome meeting to the Open Justice module. The project was working in a small team to review the evidence from an actual conviction to see whether there were grounds for appeal. A live case, with real consequences. Having read a John Grisham novel about saving death row inmates, I was ready to free an innocent man and kickstart my new career as a social justice solicitor.

What actually followed was hours of reading and blind research that often went nowhere; legal 'rabbit holes'. Disagreements and in-fighting with our team. Late nights re-reading case notes and later nights keeping a log of my experiences. This was the reality of working 'pro-bono' albeit only doing it in my spare time, if it was convenient, whilst also being paid my usual salary for my day job.

I wasn't a real solicitor, and I wasn't really working pro bono. It was hard work but without the responsibility of being a paid solicitor. But also incredibly rewarding, I learnt more about the criminal justice system and how it works than I ever could from a textbook.

In the end there were no grounds for appeal; the legal issues had been considered by the judge and defence barrister, successfully, and there was no new evidence. I wrote in my log *"if we are not to question the judge's decisions, the points of law, then what are we to question? What was the point?"*. Surely all cases have been considered by a judge so what was the point in spending so much time reviewing this one?

But that is the point. So many cases are worth reviewing but the majority will lead to nothing. And that is the importance of pro bono work. 213 hours were logged against this case for the project, and probably the same again that was not logged. The logged hours alone are equivalent to a solicitor spending 8 hours a day for more than 26 working days without being paid. That is more than five working weeks without a fee.

At the outset of this project, I viewed pro-bono work from a moral and theoretical standpoint; I am not a lawyer and so it is easy to justify others giving their time for free to 'protect the rule of law' and ensure everyone has access to justice.

At the end of the project, I realised how much time and effort and work goes into pro bono work, and how it can often be unrewarding. But I learned more than I could have ever learned from a textbook. Met new friends and learned new teamwork skills. On this occasion it was a disappointing outcome, but successful appeals are rare.

The appeal system is essential to the rule of law, and therefore ethically and morally right for solicitors to do pro bono work to protect it. But is also an invaluable source of training, to give a real insight into the criminal justice system for those naïve 46-year-old law students that think a John Grisham novel is going to inspire them to a new life.

Trying to be a lawyer for 4 months opened my eyes. To the criminal justice system, to pro bono work. I wrote, *"It has enlightened me to the realities of pro bono work; whilst initially I was inspired to start a career helping those that were wrongly incarcerated, I am now aware of the difficulties of doing it, the amount of time, the dead ends, the knowledge and skills required, which I do not yet have"*.