

Pro Bono: Appreciation of its worth during the Open Justice Law Clinic and beyond.

Drawn to W360 'Justice in Action' for its unique insight into pro bono legal activities supervised by qualified solicitors with an ability to gain valuable practical experience, I eagerly enrolled. Prior to embarking on this journey I thought I had a firm grasp on the meaning of 'pro bono'; I knew it translated as 'for the public good' but could never have developed true appreciation of its value without completion of the Open Justice activities.

Regrettably family life and working part-time meant I was confined to the modules online offering; the 'Open Justice Law Clinic', naively thinking this meant giving simple free legal advice to members of the public, it was unlikely we would be handed complex legal situations being mere students right? Wrong! I soon realised this offering was by no means a consolation prize, the cases were to be just as *real* and just as complex as those in a law firm, I was able to adopt multiple roles from client contact and researcher to writing letters of advice.

Discovering the impact legal aid cuts had on the civil sector triggered an enthusiasm to use knowledge gained through the LLB to assist others in an attempt to promote social justice. I immediately volunteered to interview the test client, primarily motivated by a desire to develop new skills but would be disingenuous not to admit that practical experience would enhance employability skills.

I recall being "*apprehensive at the thought of our client picking up on my nerves*" (*Extract 1*), after-all *nervous wreck* was not top of my attributes list and not something clients expect from professionals. As the interview progressed these nerves flittered away and I felt invigorated, somehow propelled into being a 'qualified solicitor' confidently taking notes and conversing with the client. Having successfully overcome fears of public speaking to represent the Open University, enhancing my professional

identity, I realised this experience was as much for giving others a voice as it was for strengthening ones own.

It was not until the role of researcher in our first live case that a heartfelt appreciation for the unknowing public and legal professionals commitment to pro bono began to develop. A simple road traffic accident of low monetary value, or so we thought, lead to questioning my own moral compass. Initially viewing the case as simple I recall having a “*very mistaken sense of confidence*” (Extract 2) when research commenced; I did not approach this case with the integrity expected of someone with sound legal ethics and remember feeling “*overwhelmingly disappointed for passing judgement*” (Extract 3).

Research became complex, a point of law being disputed even amongst our supervising solicitors; it was at this moment I realised pro bono work was not *just* simple legal issues. They can require hours of challenging research, leaving you questioning if an answer desperately craved for a client exists. I realised this was not always possible and began to appreciate how desperate the client must have felt facing this issue alone; without pro bono clinics where would they have turned? Having eventually compiled our letter of advice, we potentially handed someone the knowledge to positively impact their life, words cannot express that feeling; I believe it will stay with me forever.

My understanding of the value of pro bono legal work developed in light of my participation in the Open Justice activities is immeasurable; allowing ample opportunities for development of personal and professional skills I walk away with a newfound appreciation of its vital importance; not only as a practical educational tool for law students but its role in ensuring distribution of social justice.

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References

Open Justice Portfolio

Elliott, E. (2020) '*Extract 1*', originally written 8 January 2020.

Elliott, E. (2020) '*Extract 2*', originally written 9 March 2020.

Elliott, E. (2020) '*Extract 3*', originally written 20 March 2020.