

Mediating pro bono, finding my own solution!

24 years ago, I decided law was my thing. A love for social justice and public law, the interaction between the state and individual, secured my place at a prestigious law school as the first person in my family to go to university. It was a brief encounter, as a working-class girl from a rural community 'imposter syndrome' swallowed me whole.

Fast forward 24 years and I am one assignment away from completing my Graduate Law degree; inspired, by my part in a failed campaign preventing the closure of my child's village school. But as my final year loomed, the uncertainty of translating academic success into a legal career triggered 'the imposter'! Hardly surprising, as I survey the vocational landscape online, I am bombarded with adverts of zappy, slick young lawyers boasting commercial prowess and a portfolio of pro bono activity to boot, adverts for success in the only place that appears to count, London. I can see how I was both tempted and terrified many years ago, but failed to fit in. Again, as mother, Children's Commissioning project officer, mature student, I feel the very same thing?

MEDIATION; my chosen open justice activity. Its appeal? An emerging alternative to the traditional adversarial legal process and an opportunity for me to get an edge and new skills. Less expensive and stressful than going to court, mediating parties are empowered if they choose; to find a satisfactory solution for both parties, solutions far wider than a legal route can offer. But of all the 'pro bono' projects, I was mindful I had chosen the least charitable option, I was helping myself, not someone else.

Individually and through teamwork, I have developed an insight into the process of mediation, learning about conflict, analysing behaviours, and locating the underlying 'unmet needs'; that is the real reason people fall out, not simply what they present to each other. Together we have practised active listening, reflecting on our emerging skills, and learned techniques to promote confidence, trust, and rapport. All culminating in an exhilarating mock mediation, reframing parties' own words for them to figure out their own solutions. An empowering conciliatory process, mediation has helped me rediscover my inspiration to continue my legal training. To re-evaluate

the idea of advocating on someone's behalf, toward a reality where parties can be facilitated to advocate their own needs for agreement.

Participation in the activities has served to remind me that volunteering to save a school from closure was a powerful motivator in doing my law degree. I am given new context to the school campaign; how to challenge more effectively and greater conviction in the areas of law I want to focus on; despite the closure of courts within communities. 'Evaluating my 'unmet need' helps me refine my communication and determine my boundaries' recognising that in a community where even volunteering opportunities are thin on the ground (Extract 1), my biggest fear, my 'unmet need' is how will I practice here? How will I be paid?

I am reminded by my reflections that 'the abundance of openings' of The Open Justice centre and The Open University alike, 'to accommodate diversity, inclusivity and value' has been the enabler for my second chance to study law from this rural outpost (Extract 2). The activities have identified that central to my motivation from project officer to legal practitioner is to ensure that my professional identity is one with social justice at its core. Not through the narrow construct of legal services for free but through a wider reimagining of how to achieve 'public good' within our own localities, to enable wider access to services: through innovation, emerging ideas, and collaborating online.

Reference List

Rees, C. (2021) 'Extract 1', originally written 11th March 2021.

Rees, C. (2021) 'Extract 2', originally written 12th January 2021