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Finding Purpose in Helping Women War Vets

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LOS ANGELES - A veteran in a wheelchair approached me and handed me a paper napkin he had carefully sculpted into a rose. "I do not know what you want to do with the rest of your life but I hope you decide to help veterans. They need it most and are the last people to ask for it." I had just won the state-wide veteran student competition for high school students.

My legal career really began in elementary school, in the small farming community where I grew up. At my afterschool care certain kids got to eat their snacks earlier than others. I wrote a letter to one of the supervising adults explaining why I thought it was unfair. I signed my name to the letter and had each of the other kids in the late snack group initial it before leaving it on the supervisor's desk. It was my first class action lawsuit.

In rural California, the annual high school public speaking competition sponsored by the Veterans of Foreign Wars draws hundreds of competitors, almost entirely young men, who travel each weekend to small towns all over the northern half of the state. The veterans and their families raise money for scholarships through membership dues and donations. They decorate their halls and fill all of the seats for each competition.

After I won my local competition, my parents would drive me to a different town almost every weekend. Veterans from my local post traveled with us to support me, convinced that "their girl was going to go all the way." I was too nervous to eat before each competition, but afterwards I would plow through half a pan of lasagna much to the delight of the Post's cook.

My victory in Sacramento - speaking on the importance of jury service - earned me a scholarship that allowed me to go directly to UC Santa Cruz after graduation. I keep the disabled veteran's hand-folded paper rose to remind me of the generosity of all of the veterans and their families who helped to make my education possible.

I entered college determined to be a lawyer, to stand up for people in need. I studied history and served as a legislative intern at the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, D.C. At CDF I joined legislative team meetings

with congress people where we sought sponsorship for a bill improving healthcare for children. I saw firsthand how my strong public speaking skills could yield change. My colleagues at CDF encouraged me to attend Whittier Law School because of its outstanding Center for Children's Rights.

Inspired by my playground lawyering and experience at CDF, I entered law school to pursue a career representing children with disabilities. But like many law students my first year of law school left me feeling exhausted and discouraged. I was disgusted by the lack of sensitivity to women, minorities, and the poor shown by some professors and classmates. I was ready to quit.

Thankfully, my first summer clerkship at Public Counsel changed my attitude. At Public Counsel I processed an adoption and several guardianship cases and helped secure transportation accommodations for three children with disabilities. My summer experience taught me that in order to survive law school, I needed to do as much clinical work as possible. Whittier's Center for Children's Rights offered many clinics and I enrolled in them all. I learned special education, family law, and disability benefits by working directly with clients. I externed at Legal Aid Society of Orange County and Area Board XI, State Policy Board on Developmental Disabilities. Each of these experiences expanded my knowledge of



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government benefits and made law school worthwhile.

My second summer I clerked at disability Rights California, learning from attorneys Hillary Sklar and Marilyn Holle how to channel my fervor for justice into effective representation. During the summer we received a call from a veteran who had his leg amputated after an injury in service. After he completed service the veteran was diagnosed with a progressive brain cancer. The Department of Veterans Affairs refused to treat the brain cancer because they claimed it was not connected to his time in service. As a result the veteran's family had gone bankrupt trying to pay out of pocket for the medical procedures to save his life. I was outraged by the VA's treatment of this veteran and his family.

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continued expand, more veterans were returning with serious physical and mental disabilities. A Civil War-era law still made it practically impossible for attorneys to represent disabled veterans seeking assistance from the VA. In 2006, Congress passed and the President signed the Veterans Benefits Act, which allowed attorneys to represent disabled veterans. I applied for a post-graduate fellowship to work at DRC representing disabled veterans.

One of my supervising attorneys at DRC recommended contacting David Ackerly, directing attorney of the Homeless Veterans Project at Inner City Law Center for technical support if I received the fellowship. Though I

was selected as a finalist, ultimately I was not chosen for the fellowship. However, this fall ICLC was seeking a new attorney to help meet the needs of a rapidly expanding group of clients: female veterans with disabilities. I applied and was hired after I took the bar exam. I am incredibly grateful to David and the staff at ICLC for giving me the opportunity to serve veterans.

If veterans are, as the veteran in the wheel chair told me, the people who need help most and are the last to ask for it, then female veterans, especially those who have suffered military sexual trauma, may have the greatest need for representation among veterans. Thirty percent of women who have served since 9/11 report they have been raped during active duty.

These veterans desperately need support from the VA in order to heal and recover. Establishing the VA's responsibility to provide financial assistance and increased access to healthcare and therapy requires determination and resourcefulness. Doing this work allows me to pay back all of the people who believed in me and supported me.

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