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Trending @ RWU Law: Dean Yelnosky's Post: "Getting Proximate": October 22, 2016

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Dean Yelnosky's Post

October 22, 2016

"Getting Proximate"

Posted by Michael Yelnosky on 10/22/2016 at 10:44 AM



Less than two years ago, RWU Law hosted a day-long symposium on the issue of mass incarceration, [an event](#) attended by approximately 350 judges, lawyers, law students, and others. It was a remarkable day, but two moments in particular stand out for me. [Bryan Stevenson, Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative](#), gave a gripping speech about the justice system from his vantage point as a lawyer representing clients in criminal cases throughout the country. He explained that one of the reasons the United States is unresponsive to the growing inequality of wealth and the wholesale warehousing of the poor, particularly people of color, is that too many people go about their lives without having to confront these issues. Residential segregation and incarceration keep the poor and people of color walled off from whites and those with more resources. Stevenson encouraged the audience to “get proximate” to those in need. By doing so, he explained, we could begin to humanize those who are the victims of punishing poverty, blocked opportunity, and profound injustice. That process would create in us the empathy necessary to fight injustice and would give true support and comfort to the afflicted.

Later in the day, a sitting federal judge interviewed former inmates about their lives before, during, and after their incarceration. The conversation was intimate and bittersweet. These were people who had made mistakes and were rebuilding their lives, but there was no denying that the circumstances of their birth made a prison term more likely for them than for most, and their criminal records made it more difficult for them to find a job, get a loan, rent an apartment, and travel – all necessary steps in the rebuilding process. The human cost of this country's choices about public education, housing, social programs, policing, and incarceration was right there for all of us to see, and many tears were shed. It

was a moment unlike any other I have experienced at an academic conference hosted by a law school, and it was an example of exactly what Stevenson had been talking about.

We spend a lot of time at RWU Law talking about our *pro bono* experiential learning requirement, our clinics and clinical externships, and the many other ways in which our students get invaluable experience preparing for practice while they are in law school. We also talk about the powerful feelings students can experience while they do this work and the genuine ways in which they can improve the lives of those they represent. When our students get proximate amazing things happen to them and to those they assist.

Recently, I learned of two examples of the power of getting our students proximate to individuals in need.

Our [Pro Bono Collaborative](#) ACI Civil Legal Clinics Project sends students working with *pro bono* lawyers to the Moran Medium facility at the Adult Corrections Institute. The students meet with incarcerated individuals to try to assist them with questions or problems involving civil legal issues. They then work with the supervising attorneys (Steve Miller and Dawn Euer '10) to develop a plan and do any necessary research, and they return to the ACI to continue to work to help solve the legal problem. Students working on this project have helped address family law, small claims, re-entry rights, and housing issues.

In one case, a student met with an inmate at the ACI who had \$2,500 confiscated upon his arrest. He was owed that money by the municipal police department that effected the arrest. The student and supervising attorney learned of the money, learned the client was entitled to it, and went about getting it for him. The client later sent a handwritten note intended for the student expressing his deep appreciation. It read, in part:

“
To Whom it May Concern:”

“
I am writing to tell you how grateful I am for the help I received from the Roger Williams law students and lawyers that visited the ACI. They worked tirelessly on my case and actually picked up the check and deposited it into my bank account here at the prison. I hope this clinic continues to work at the prison in the future. Thank you for your time.”

“
Sincerely,”

“ ”

Another student working on the PBC project assisted an inmate in resolving a family law matter. Her client wrote the following letter to us about her work.

“ *To Whom it May Concern:* ”

“ *My name is _____. I am currently an inmate at the John J. Moran Medium Security. I was recently fortunate enough to participate in a law clinic that was put on by the Pro Bono Collaborative with students from Roger Williams. I was lucky to work with a young woman named _____. She was extremely helpfull [sic] answering in depth any and all questions I raised to her, [and] she remained steadfast and resolute through even the most challenging questions and problems I posed to her.* ”

“ *I would highly recommend _____. She displayed enduring qualities that any client or law firm would be lucky to have on there [sic] team.* ”

“ *Sincerely,* ”

“ ”

One of the students, who was about to graduate, wrote me that “I feel like it is moments like these that make all of this hard work feel worth it. . . . [I]f I could go back in time I would so I could do more work on this project.”

These are the kinds of experiences that remind us at RWU Law why we urge and help our students to run **to** and not **from** people who are suffering. In the words of Bryan Stevenson, there is something important in proximity - something important for our students, something important for those they assist, and

something important for our society, including, perhaps, the answers to some of our most challenging social problems. This is part of what it means to be a member of the RWU Law community.