

Reflecting on a Year of Pro Bono Work with Support Center for Child Advocates

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I have spent the last year as a Volunteer Attorney with the Support Center for Child Advocates. As I reflect on my incredible experience over the last year, three key takeaways come to mind: (1) creative representation; (2) the importance of support system for children; and (3) humanity in the law.

Creative Representation

As a Volunteer Attorney with Child Advocates, I had the honor of representing two young children under the age of two and an adolescent child in elementary school. Both matters had completely different facts, with different levels of familial support, and resources. The one thing that both matters, and in fact, almost all Child Advocates matters, have in common is that we must advocate for the standard “what is in the best interest of the child,” in addition to advocating for our client’s expressed interest.

In the context of a courtroom where parents and guardians’ potential rights are under fire, the phrase takes on a life of its own. Case law, statutes, and scholars have taken time to define what “the best interest of the child” standard means and how that standard should be applied in dependency proceedings with children.

The best interest of the child standard is unique to every situation. While case law might provide a framework and legal standard, the governing authority does not and could not anticipate all the unique facts present in every case. Often, as a Volunteer Attorney, you find yourself determining if removing a child from the only home they have ever known is in their best interest while also weighing in potential elimination of any formed attachments, family structure, and other factors that are crucial to childhood development.

What I have found over the course of this year is that advocating for children requires creative representation. The position you may end up advocating for is oftentimes premised solely on the facts and your relationship with your clients and their support system.

It is through the creative representation that I have become a better storyteller and improvised ways to inform the court of critical information while still maintaining rapport with my client and my client’s support system. Through my representation of children, I have also come to fully appreciate how crucial it is for children to have a support system.

Support System of Children

Children's support systems come in all different shapes and sizes. More often than not, I find myself in awe at the extended family members that come through for children during their most vulnerable moments. I have been inspired by strangers who volunteer as medical foster parents, agreeing to provide life-sustaining medical care to infant children. I have seen firsthand the way a grandparent can change the course of a child's life forever. These are only a few of the thousands of examples of support systems that step up for children.

Volunteering as an attorney with Child Advocates is not just representing children during critical times in their life, it is also forming relationships with people who choose to take on caregiving roles for your client. The relationships formed with your client's support system are essential as they inform how you will advocate for your client in court.

As a Volunteer Attorney, the child and their support system will look to you to translate what happened in court, ensure that necessary resources are obtained, and confirm that the child's needs are being met. Working with your client's support system can be both challenging and rewarding, but it is crucial to whole and complete representation. Navigating your client's support system and building rapport with them blends into my final, and arguably most valuable, takeaway from my time as a Volunteer Attorney – finding humanity in the law.

Humanity in the Law

Throughout the last year as a Volunteer Attorney, I have seen firsthand how the law intersects with humanity – how terminating parental rights or how granting temporary legal custody to a grandparent can change the course of a child's life forever. These are not easy discussions nor decisions to make. At the end of the day, your client and their needs are put first.

Many people may argue that all areas of the law are, or should be, people centered. However, this work stands in stark contrast from my legal experience. Often, my day-to-day clients are focused on money, and rightfully so, as a component of their business model depends on the economic welfare of their institution. Economic resources may play a factor in discerning what is in the best interest of your client, but it is hardly ever the only factor.

As a Volunteer Attorney with Child Advocates, it is a rare and unique opportunity to perform legal work that is solely people centered, and in this line of work, child centered. I am honored to have had the opportunity to provide legal services in this capacity and look forward to representing more clients through the Child Advocates.