

I had just come out of the room I shared with my two sisters when I overheard my stepfather (whom I’ll refer to as “John”) cursing at Mom. Instantly I knew that this night would be filled with screaming and violence—a familiar night that only ends when Mom doesn’t fight back and leaves the house with her kids for a day or two. I rushed back into my room to tell my sisters to pack their clothes. The faster we get out, the less injury Mom suffers. But then Mom suddenly cried out my older sister’s name for help. My sister and I told our younger sister to stay put, and ran outside to the living room. There, John was brandishing a kitchen knife while Mom was swinging a pillow to keep distance. The rest of the night is a blur. I recall that at one moment John slapped Mom’s face. At another, he pulled my sister’s hair while I attempted to break his grip with my feeble, 14-year-old hands. But one thing I still distinctly remember from all the chaos is the fear I had when I heard the police sirens drawing near.

It was a question asked repeatedly by the law enforcement and legal professionals assigned to our case. Why didn’t we seek help from the police earlier? The reason was simple: we would rather endure sporadic outbursts of domestic violence than risk deportation for our undocumented status. So when a prosecutor approached us outside the courtroom on the day of John’s arraignment, I looked at him with all the distrust and apprehension I could harbor. Of course, I didn’t know that all he wanted was to hand us a brochure that read “Legal Aid Society of Orange County” and connect us to lawyers who might be able to help us obtain U visa, which provides alien victims of violent crimes a potential avenue for permanent residence.

The prosecutor’s gesture, however insignificant or spontaneous it may seem to others, meant the world to me. Through one small action the prosecutor showed me that he sympathized with our story he had read from the police report; that he saw my family as individuals in need of help and not as criminals to be put behind bars; and that he understood how the piece of paper he

held in his hands could change my family’s life. As I contextualized the prosecutor’s compassion, and later witnessed the legal aid team’s determination to bring justice for my family, I began to realize that the most valuable outcome of this entire process wasn’t a change of my legal status. Instead, it was that I learned, on a very intimate level, the power of the legal profession to make meaningful changes in people’s lives.

My first opportunity to put this valuable lesson into practice surfaced during my senior year in college, when I volunteered at JusticeCorps clinics to assist low-income litigants in family and housing law proceedings. This experience was particularly meaningful to me because I got to help individuals struggling with domestic violence—the very problem that has strengthened my tenacity and steered me to this point in life. While it was sometimes disheartening to observe again how rampant and insidious this disease was, I took comfort in that each minute of attention I paid to the victims’ stories and declarations would play a small part in providing security, and on some occasions U visa, to more families like mine.

Ironically, however, it wasn’t until I made the decision to help a domestic violence offender that I became completely committed to pursuing a legal career. I first met Mr. S when he was wandering outside the clinic, visibly anxious as if he didn’t have the courage to open the doors. I approached him to confirm that he was indeed at the right place and ushered him inside to begin the intake interview. But soon I discovered something troubling about Mr. S: he was not here to request restraining and child custody orders but to *respond* to them. It felt as though time had stopped. My purpose of joining JusticeCorps was to defend the vulnerable from the Johns of the world; yet sitting three feet away from me was a man who represented another woman’s John. Because the clinic neither required nor prohibited me from assisting an offender, my instinct was to hold onto my prejudice and resentment, and simply provide Mr. S a referral to

the county’s bar association. Yet I couldn’t resist feeling something inexplicably unjust about my intention. I had used my childhood as an excuse to conclude that Mr. S was not worth my service—that he was nothing more than what he appeared to be. I realized that this contradicted the compassion I have always aspired in the legal profession. Not long ago I had acquired a new life when a certain prosecutor refused to follow the steps of others in reducing my family to “illegal immigrants.” Mr. S also deserved the same.

I do not know how the court ruled on the requests for restraining and child custody orders against Mr. S. But I left the clinic that day knowing I made a small impact on Mr. S, who couldn’t rely on anything but the law for his chance to be able to see his children grow up. The sense of fulfillment I had this day, the satisfaction of volunteering at JusticeCorps for a year, and the evolution of my life in the last decade have collectively led me to one purpose. I want to study the law and employ my education to bring meaningful changes for the most vulnerable members of our society navigate through whatever challenges they face, be it domestic violence, wrongful termination, personal injury, immigration, or product liability. This is the purpose I’ve carried through all my positions in a supporting role to many attorneys in the last three years, and I am ready now more than ever to begin my own journey as a future lawyer.