

2020 Terry Bryant Accident & Injury Law Firm Scholarship

In the middle of an average school day my phone vibrates constantly. Between parents returning communication, teachers slowly losing their tenuous grip over their class, and incessant never-ending emails, I always feel genuine awe if my phone survives the school day with some battery.

While covering for a class whose teacher simply packed up and left a week prior, I noticed I had seventeen missed calls. Sometimes seventeen missed calls happen. As the Grade Level Chair, Service Coordinator, Chess Club coach, Social Justice Club host, and full time AP teacher, sometimes seventeen people need to speak with me while the class and I are discussing *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. But these calls were all from students. With coverage secured, I darted to the other side of the school. I had memorized many of their schedules, and knew what class the calls came from.

I could hear the yelling as I shouldered through students enjoying the spectacle and novice teachers who were understandably scared.

A student had entered into a screaming match with a first-year teacher. Upon seeing me, the student demanded I take his side. After some convincing, the student agreed to circle the building a few times with me. Eventually, with the student deescalated, we returned to the classroom I was covering.

The student explained that the Psychology teacher had made a joke about schizophrenia. Suddenly the entire scene made sense. Myself, and other teachers, had gone to this student's house before and his mother, though never officially diagnosed, demonstrated classic symptoms of the condition. His anger made sense. He and the Psychology teacher handled the interaction poorly. As someone who taught fresh out of college, even the teachers poor handling of the situation made sense.

This teacher wanted to stack infractions: verbal assault, threatening a teacher, behavior that disrupts the learning environment, behavior that threatens the safety of students and staff...the consequences could have resulted in a week-long suspension where the student would stay with his unmedicated mother for an additional eight hours a day. The reaction felt draconian at worst, and heavy handed at best.

Luckily, I had read the handbook too. With the best wishes of my principal, I used my authority as Grade Level Chair to collect incident reports from every student in the class as well as the teacher. I then examined the accounts looking for the language of a direct threat from the student. I found none. I looked for evidence of de-escalation on the part of the teacher. I found none. Ultimately, the student received in-school suspension for two days and the counselor facilitated a restorative circle between the teacher and student. This interaction typifies my relationship with many students.

I never seriously considered practicing law. When my inclination to further my studies still leaned toward a doctorate in literature, the students were calling me their lawyer. They call me their lawyer because they depend on me to secure their rights. Students have refused to allow

themselves to be searched without my presence. Often, students refuse to write incident reports for fear of self-incriminating, and will sometimes request to speak to me privately before writing anything down. When a parent cannot be present, they or their student have asked for my presence instead.

During my tenure as an educator, I have pushed myself to be a teacher of literature and of life. One hundred percent of my students are Black, Hispanic, or Afro-Hispanic. In school and in life, the only rights they will exercise are those they know about.

After six years of teaching, and loving every exhausting minute, I accept that I now exist on the periphery of work that I want at the center. Serving a primarily Hispanic community illuminated the injustices I now plan to combat as a lawyer.

I am a Black female from the East Coast who was raised middle class. Upon moving to Houston, my prior ignorance about what immigrants and members in undocumented communities faced cannot be understated. Not until undocumented students started asking for my help did I start grasping my lapses in knowledge as well as the extent of injustice members of this marginalized community face daily.

There is a distinctive powerlessness and hopelessness I feel when my most marginalized students and families ask for my help. Powerless because I understand how desperate a parent or student feels to ask their AP English Literature teacher a question about tenant rights or how to manage an instance of police brutality. Hopelessness because I know if I cannot find the answer, the answer is maybe inaccessible because of knowledge and resource gaps as well as fear of reaching out.

I joined education to fulfill my commitment to social justice, and my experiences with my pupils has driven my social justice work into another direction.

As an immigration lawyer, I will advocate on behalf of a community who has unequal access to exercising their rights. And I will manage that advocacy with the same inexhaustible determination, cunning, and vigor with which I had served the same community educationally. Few of the additional roles I took on as an educator came with additional pay. The roles that did pay did not match the hours dedicated to the office. Often these were self-created, and frequently self-funded. I simply sought to fill gaps that the system did not seem to have the capacity to address.

Given the population I will serve, much of my work will continue to be pro bono or through another nonprofit organization. I have zero interest in securing payment from the clients I will represent. As someone not motivated by money, the Terry Bryant Accident & Injury Law Firm Scholarship will ensure that I do not need to detour into more profitable but less community centered work.

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