

My younger brother, Hayk, had just turned eighteen months when he said his final words. At this point, he had only been talking for three months, but his speech regressed so quickly and without any apparent reason that Hayk remains one of the most unique cases that leaves medical professionals in a rare state of speechlessness. Following this regression, my brother began resorting to visceral mechanisms such as screaming and crying to communicate his emotions. Although my family has grown accustomed to it, this form of expression posed a problem in the classroom setting. In the first grade, my brother was consistently removed from the class due to his screaming. My parents and I had several meetings with the teaching staff to explain that this behavior was involuntary and Hayk's only method of communication; however, they remained unable to accommodate his special needs and unwilling to find a better solution.

This was the first time I felt as if I needed to advocate for the rights of someone who was largely defenseless. Determined to fight for my brother, I began writing letters and arranged meetings with district faculty and the behavioral therapists familiar with his case. As a result of my efforts, Hayk became the first child in his district to have an independent therapist accompany him at school, encouraging him to communicate in his own way. This case continues to serve as precedent in his district, preserving the rights of children who require specialized care within the classroom environment.

Understanding the impact I could make, I began gravitating toward helping those who have difficulty advocating for themselves. This attraction intensified throughout my academic career, and became my inspiration for pursuing humanitarian law. From each case I studied in my Trial Advocacy class at USC, to every defendant I was assigned to during my internship at the Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office, the consistent outrage I felt upon learning of the adversities imposed on others solidified my objective to contribute to a more equitable political system – one that accepts that all humans have fundamental rights that need to be respected.

Shortly after coming to this realization, I found myself in Harlingen, Texas during the heart of the U.S. immigration crisis. Alongside my USC Trial Advocacy professor and a select few of my teammates, I met with hundreds of immigrant children who were detained in cages and separated from their parents in removal proceedings. With no means to communicate in the English language, and certainly unable to

defend themselves in a court of law, it appeared as if the American legal system had set them up for failure. To combat this predisposition, I began advising attorneys at the South Texas Pro-Bono Asylum Representation Project (ProBAR) on how to apply the Fifth Circuit immigration-court discovery request case law when defending these children from deportation. In a recent call with one of the attorneys at ProBAR, she shared an exciting update regarding the status of one of our first cases. The attorney and her colleagues used the training we developed to win a case which stopped the federal government from using fraudulent dental examinations to classify and detain minors as adults, making a great victory for us all.

At the time of this writing, I am in my home country of Armenia. I was drawn here as a result of a recent war with neighboring Azerbaijan, which led our nation to suffer thousands of teenage casualties and hundreds of prisoners of war. However, despite the crossfire having ceased, the battle persists for those who continue to struggle with the effects of severe mental and physical trauma. Witnessing the severity of this impact encouraged me to relocate and contribute to the post-war recovery effort in my homeland. As an employee at the Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs, I spearheaded initiatives that streamlined the process of gathering aid from the Diaspora and distributing it throughout Armenia. Independently, I founded the Qele Lao Foundation in Yerevan, a humanitarian organization aimed at creating opportunities for physically and emotionally disabled veterans to regain their sense of purpose and reintegrate back into society. By teaching English-language classes and sourcing buyers for the handmade goods produced during our weekly workshops, I strive to lay the groundwork that encourages both academic advancement and financial independence for our soldiers. Finally, over the past few months, I have also initiated a project to evaluate the effects of white phosphorus warfare used on bystander civilians in Armenian villages. While I have not yet been able to establish this project in a formal capacity, I have begun working with local physicians and attorneys to visit the homes of victims and conduct a series of interviews evaluating both the short and long-term consequences of this warfare.

In the fall, I will return to the United States as a student at Columbia Law School. During my time in New York, I look forward to accessing Columbia's network of international humanitarian organizations, which will allow me to expand my research beyond the classroom and clinical setting to

make a real-world impact. Further, with support from Columbia's renowned faculty mentors, I can shed light on the war crimes I have actively identified in Armenia and officially study them within an international legal setting. After law school, I envision my passion leading me abroad. My dream is to work as an advisor to the United Nations, or perhaps a consultant for different international organizations, NGOs, think-tanks and governments. I hope the expertise I build throughout law school allows me to advocate for people enduring hardship that cannot fight for themselves, like I once did for my brother. Ultimately, whether in a detention center at the Texas border, a rehabilitation center in Armenia, a doctor's office with Hayk or the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, determination remains my driving force. Although my brother may not yet have his voice, I am committed to using mine to advocate for him and all those who need it.