

LETTER TO A YOUNG PUBLIC INTEREST ATTORNEY

*Paula D. Pearlman**

I applaud your choice of becoming a public interest attorney. I have had an incredibly meaningful and productive career. I have always loved my profession as I see it as a tool for social change and as a means to increase the amount of justice that exists in our society (if it can be quantified).

I have a few reflections for you as you begin your career.

1. ASK QUESTIONS. Really, don't pretend you know everything because you don't and ultimately you may harm your clients by acting like you do. When you ask questions it demonstrates a curiosity and excitement about your work, and signifies that you are an active learner. (More about that below.) Of course, you should have more than a vague idea about your issue, and ask for some guidance rather than have someone do your thinking for you. And don't wait too long to ask questions as you

* Executive Director of the Disability Rights Legal Center (DRLC), formerly Western Law Center for Disability Rights, a cross-disability rights organization. Ms. Pearlman is a graduate of Southwestern University School of Law, and the University of California, Los Angeles. She has a distinguished career of over 20 years in public interest law. Prior to her current position at the DRLC, she was the Deputy Director of Advocacy Programs and Director of Litigation. Ms. Pearlman is also a Visiting Associate Professor of Law at Loyola Law School, Los Angeles, teaching Disability Rights and Special Education law as well as litigation skills. She has extensive experience in class action litigation and legislative advocacy in the areas of disability rights, sex discrimination and harassment, and immigration law.

© 2009 Paula D. Pearlman. The copyright in each article is owned by the respective author. Except as otherwise provided, the author of each article grants permission for copies of that article to be made for classroom use, provided that each copy is distributed at or below cost, the author and the Los Angeles Public Interest Law Journal are identified on each copy, proper notice of copyright is affixed to each copy, and the author and the Journal are notified of the use.

will be wasting precious time on trying to determine even where to start to look for the answer.

2. **RESPECT DIFFERENCES:** In fact, respect everyone and the legal process, including judges, bailiffs, secretaries, and attorneys alike. With respect to your clients, you have something to contribute to the world and public interest law, and so do your clients. Your clients may not look like you or sound like you, but they are entitled to the utmost respect from you in all your dealings with them. You are not doing them a favor, helping them, or taking care of them. You are enforcing important civil and other legal rights on their behalf and you need your clients to right the wrongs in our society. Essentially, there is no place for arrogance in the public interest legal profession and there is no room to patronize anyone. It is neither professional nor collegial. Being polite goes a long way as a lawyer.

3. **BE A LIFE LONG LEARNER:** Some people say, find your passion. Either one works for me. Challenge yourself to learn new things, explore new areas, and deepen your knowledge in your existing practice areas. It is exciting to pull different areas of the law together into an elegant and winning argument. This does not just apply to the law either. Take up that hobby, interest or sport. It will make you a more interesting person to have something to talk about besides the law and it helps you come down from the events of the day, which is essential for sustainability in the profession.

4. **GET OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE:** You have all heard that you must get out of your comfort zone, and I mean it. It really works. Take risks to challenge yourself and the legal system to ensure greater access to justice. Some things are just too important for us to remain complacent. Find allies if you are afraid or lacking skills. I know it sounds unbelievably silly but I used to whistle, “Whenever I feel afraid, I whistle a happy tune . . .” from the King and I. It gave me courage when I was afraid.

5. **TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS:** You are doing what you are doing because there is something inside of you that drives you to do this work. Maybe like me, you are wired this way. Trust your instincts to know the difference between right and wrong. You will be challenged many times to cut corners, look the other way, just do

something for so and so. And if you do it will jeopardize your credibility and your ability to practice law. The legal profession is an unusually small world and word gets around. All you have as a lawyer is your reputation, and it is yours to lose if you are not careful.

6. **FIND A MENTOR:** Find someone who has your best interests at heart and wants to help you grow as an attorney and a person. Find someone who truly cares about you, has the time to work with you, and has the necessary expertise. When you have found this person or persons, invest in the relationship by being prompt, respectful, and focused when you spend time with them. Take time to learn from them their paths to success. Learn with them more about who you are so you do not create any unnecessary obstacles on your path to changing the world—your path to greatness. And eventually, become a mentor as well.

7. **KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE PRIZE:** There will be many obstacles and barriers to overcome; defeats big and small in your cases and your work, for your clients, and within the community. While you must do your best to be prepared for your cases and work, sometimes you are still not successful. Acknowledge the errors and defeats; learn from them and do not make the same mistake twice. Keep working to bring about the change you want to create. Celebrate the victories and keep up the good work.

8. **CREATE A COMMUNITY OF FRIENDS AND FAMILY:** In order to sustain yourself doing social justice work, create a community of friends, family and like-minded colleagues. Papers do not keep you warm at night, tell you you're doing a great job, keep your spirits up, make food for you when you've been working 12-15 hour days, or make you rest. Your friends and family do that for you. If you want to start a family, it is always the right time and there is always enough money, notwithstanding everything else you've heard. One of my daughters asked me once, as I apologized for getting there just in time to kiss her good night, "You love your work Mommy, don't you?" "Yes," I answered. "But you love us more, don't you?" "Yes," I answered again. If at all possible, keep love in your life to sustain you.

I have been privileged to work in a variety of legal settings with talented, compassionate, and smart attorneys, and to have caring and loving friends and family. I wish the same for you in your career. If you cannot work as a public interest attorney, there are so many opportunities to do pro bono work, and to contribute to important causes. There is more than one way to make a difference in this world.

Sincerely,

Paula D. Pearlman