

## LETTER TO A YOUNG PUBLIC INTEREST ATTORNEY

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*Hernán D. Vera\**

Welcome to a community of advocates! I commend you for choosing to answer the call of the marginalized and oppressed, and for stepping up during a period of such intense need.

Because I know most of you have thought deeply about the many structural and political reasons why civil rights work is so needed, I do not presume to lecture you about why you should pursue a career in the public interest. But, given my background in both the private sector and public interest, I believe I can offer some insights and practical advice on how these two sectors interact.

I began my career as a business litigator at O'Melveny & Myers in 1994. Like so many colleagues committed to public interest, I joined a firm with the intention of obtaining valuable litigation experience – skills that I knew I would later need in representing the poor. My many years at O'Melveny & Myers provided me with an intensive and world-class education into complex litigation at all levels. The mentors I had during that period were among the best

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\* President & CEO, Public Counsel, Los Angeles. After graduating from the UCLA School of Law, Mr. Vera clerked for the Honorable Consuelo B. Marshall in the United States District Court for the Central District of California. He received his B.A. with Distinction from Stanford University in 1991. Prior to joining Public Counsel, he worked for O'Melveny & Myers LLP and the Mexican American Legal and Educational Defense Fund. He joined Public Counsel in May 2002 as Directing Attorney of its Consumer Law Project. Mr. Vera has risen to become one of the nation's leading consumer rights' advocates and has supervised hundreds of individual client litigation matters involving consumer fraud. Currently, he is overseeing dozens of cases involving alleged fraud by home loan brokers and lenders, which threaten families and senior citizens with the loss of their homes.

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attorneys I have worked with, and showed me in very personal terms what people of conscience can accomplish in a business environment.

In 2002, I saw the perfect opportunity to put those skills into action for the communities I vowed eventually to represent. I left the firm to join Public Counsel, the country's largest pro bono, public interest law firm, where I have directed the Consumer Law Project for the past six years until I was selected as President in March 2008.

Here are a few thoughts for those of you considering a major law firm prior to a career in public interest law.

First of all, don't believe for a second that spending time at a major law firm will disqualify you from a future position in public interest law. I hear this myth all the time, and I have found it to be universally false. To the contrary, exceptional experience and training at a big law firm will very often enhance a candidate's appeal to a public interest organization looking for applicants with proven skills. For this to apply, however, you absolutely must show a continued commitment to public interest while at the firm – either through significant pro bono, service on boards of nonprofit organizations, or other forms of public service. We routinely receive impressive applications from big firm lawyers whose stated commitment to public interest is belied most strikingly by their lack of public service during their time at the firm. These applicants do not get far. Be prepared to explain in detail how and why you have stayed involved with the community while at the firm.

Second, while at the firm, seek out high-quality opportunities that complement the interests and goals you have in public interest. If your dream is to litigate civil rights impact cases, then immerse yourself in complex class actions where you will be trained on the fundamentals of certification, class notice, etc. Take as many depositions as you can, and volunteer for any cases going to trial. On the other hand, if you are interested in economic development issues, many transactional departments at major law firms can provide you with the corporate and tax experience that you will need to be an effective advocate on issues such as affordable housing, redevelopment, and zoning. Be strategic in your workload choices and take an active role in planning how your firm experience will

relate to your future public interest work.

Third, no matter how many years you may find yourself engaged in work that is not directly tied to the public interest, make sure to keep alive and vibrant your motivation for entering law school, your connections to those doing this work, and the passion for justice that fueled your initial aspirations. I cannot overestimate the importance of this. More than half of those entering the public interest programs at many law schools never find their way back to public interest as a career, and we all can name numerous law school classmates whose dreams of a life in public service never materialized after years of practice in other sectors.

For me, during my many years at the firm, my main anchor to public interest has always been my wife, Julie Su, the Director of Litigation at the Asian Pacific American Legal Center and the finest public interest lawyer I know. Her complete and utter devotion to her clients, her fearlessness in the face of significant odds and resources, and her unparalleled skill in using cross-racial community organizing as a model for civil rights litigation has shown me on a daily basis the transformative power that one person can have on the lives of the poor and on other community advocates. Keeping in close touch with friends and colleagues active in the social justice movement can be pivotal to an attorney's ability to make a life-changing decision to come back to public interest law.

And, finally, regardless of how busy you may find yourself at a firm, never forget to make time to represent actual people in need. Nothing keeps alive the public interest flame like active engagement with a client who is depending upon you (and only you) to survive under difficult circumstances. Nothing will focus your energies like the knowledge that a family is depending on you to keep their housing, or a single mother whose only means of keeping her family together in this country is the immigration assistance that you will provide. Pursuing meaningful pro bono cases while at a firm will keep in perspective the reasons that you chose the law, and will offer you a glimpse of what life may be like if and when you decide to pursue it full time.

Of course, life as a public interest lawyer is not necessarily easier than life at a major firm. Seeing the intractable problems that

the poor face every day can be demoralizing, as can the knowledge that the law is often a very imperfect tool to address the multi-faceted causes of poverty. The hours can be just as long, and the struggle for justice at the courthouse—often with unsympathetic judges, always with a shortage of resources—lonely, and much more difficult.

But, for me, the rewards of this daily work have been immense. Every day for the past six years, I have risen in the morning with a clearly defined sense of purpose, knowing that I am part of a larger movement of advocates dedicated to creating a more equitable society. I have been so incredibly proud to be a part of a public interest community that understands that standing on the sidelines is a betrayal of trust. Ours is a profession that believes that public service and pro bono are embodiments of a conception of rights and freedoms that takes seriously the realities of poverty, unequal opportunity, discrimination, and economic injustice.

I have been honored to come to work each day for the hundreds of homeowners that we have fought to save from foreclosure; for the countless undocumented children and families who have been ensnared by our nation's unjust immigration laws; for the thousands of homeless and hungry individuals who have been able to access benefits as a result of our services throughout Los Angeles County.

It is for and on behalf of these clients that Public Counsel, for nearly four decades, has been at the forefront of the struggle for the civil rights of the poor—a struggle that defines in a fundamental way who we choose to be as a nation. Every week, our 35+ attorneys and thousands of volunteers are there, in the community, providing free legal services—in high schools where we conduct teen legal clinics, and at youth shelters where runaway teens can come in off the streets and get help. We are there protecting and advocating for kids in the public schools, where children routinely fail to receive appropriate special education services, and at juvenile halls where troubled kids are too often treated simply as inmates. We are there at the courthouse, working to ensure that foster children can be adopted, homeowners are protected, immigrants are defended, and the homeless represented to the fullest extent possible. And we are in communities of color throughout Southern California fighting to ensure that non-profits and child care centers have the support that

they need to continue their vital work.

We will never know the true potential of so many of our brothers and sisters caught in this struggle for dignity and survival. But we can, each of us, work to ensure that this next generation of children and families has the opportunities and protections to avoid becoming the next generation of our clients. By doing so, we not only protect the fragile light of promise in the eyes of each child, we nurture the hope of every mother, the dreams of every immigrant, and the courage of every man and woman, young or old, who overcomes the hunger in their bellies with a hunger for justice. This inaugural issue pays tribute to you—the next generation of public interest lawyers—who share this hunger, and to our clients, who challenge us on a daily basis never to lose it.

I look forward to working with you in the years ahead.

Very truly yours,

Hernán D. Vera