



Public Interest Boot Camp 2019: Reference Materials

SERVING DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

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IT'S NOT "JUST A NAME"

When I see my role being suspected ("Are you a real attorney?"), my clients being dismissed ("She calls the police all the time"), or my client's case narrative being questioned ("I have been a judge for 12 years, never heard of this before") – balancing between advocacy to educate the system and picking the right forum/time to advocate becomes tricky. Would challenging or calling out the beliefs of the Judge harm the outcome in my client's case? Or if I speak up, for example when being asked if I am a real attorney, would I finally be able to have the private bar attorney see me for who I am – a licensed, barred, and competent colleague who is here to do the same job as them – to represent my client?

That's my balancing act, a life lived being who I am, which in no particular order is, – a woman of color, a feminist, an attorney, and a foreign-born immigrant to the United States. And it has taken me a long journey to reach where I am with my uniqueness.

After moving to America, I used to order my food and beverages choosing names from Archie Comics (a staple among urban, English-medium school-aged children growing up in India a few decades ago) – and each time I ordered, I picked a different name. I cycled between Betty, Veronica, Midge, and sometimes Reggie. One day, a colleague and I went to pick up food I had ordered for lunch for us. He asked for "_ and Protima's order" but they said there was order for "-and Betty" – they had his order tagged with "Betty's" order. He looked at me, I told him I was Betty, laughed the matter away, and waited for lunch. When we were walking back to work, he said "You ashamed of your name?" "No", I said, " I just want my food and it is complicated to spell P-R-O-T as in Terry – I- M as in Mary – A each time I order a latte or Chow Mein" (there you have it – my secret is out). He shrugged, went away, and my day was not the same.

While it takes me longer to order my latte these days (I have to spell – see above), and often my pick-up order is the one that has "name unclear" on it, I don't mind drawing attention to the fact that I am different – and they should learn to say my name.

What does this matter in the practice of law? There is justice in being acknowledged as you – in knowing that your story, challenge, or barrier is uniquely yours, will not be brushed aside as "other" "different" or "unconventional" and that the systemic barriers created by sameness (everyone can pay off credit card debts; people know to call 911 when they are in danger, etc.) leave out those who do not fall within these assumptions.

Crafting legal theories and case strategies which uniquely represent each client's narrative, remembering barriers are different for different people, and taking into account systemic challenges faced by each client, chips away at sameness and leads to solutions for each person in ways that alleviate the problems unique to them. Allowing for earning abilities to be taken into account while setting a payment plan for debt owed or finding a public place for safe child custody exchanges in cases of domestic violence, are some examples of how systems can benefit each individual, rather than assuming all debt payment plans look the same or all co-parenting plans are uniform.

I was able to practice law as who I am, I was able to practice law for each of my clients as who they are, and in time, I hope that the legal system sees each case and each client deserving a unique solution to their problem, even though the law is the same for all. That's access to justice with a heavy dose of "meaningful" added to it.