

Mentorship and Pro Bono

By David Olshan

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A pro bono attorney helps a low income individual access our court system. An experienced attorney mentors an inexperienced attorney. Two great traditions have merged with the advent of the Transition Into Practice (TIP) program of the State Bar of Nevada. This brief article explores my recent experience as a TIP mentor and why helping the disadvantaged by pairing them with inexperienced attorneys strengthens our profession and our society.

I direct the Las Vegas Office of Nevada Legal Services, a statewide law firm and pro bono program that has served Nevada's low income population for over 30 years. I have practiced law in Nevada since October of 1990 and I took "Bridge the Gap" my first year. While I appreciated all of the information imparted to me, the training seemed more like a Gravina Island Bridge leading to nowhere.

When I first heard of the TIP program and how it paired new attorneys with seasoned veterans, I could not see the TIP program as accomplishing much more than Bridge the Gap. For me, it was a practical nuisance. An attorney in our office recently passed the bar and needed a mentor. Instead of entrusting her to an outside attorney, I decided to sign up. Since I was the attorney's supervisor, I felt responsible for her training. I attended the bar's training and readied for the next six months under the mentoring plan.

A few days later, she resigned and my main motivation for being a mentor left with her. I notified the bar and began withdrawing from the TIP program. Almost the next day, the bar asked if I would mentor another new attorney who happened to be well-known in state government. I could not refuse this offer. That same day, the bar assigned another mentee. Given the newness of the program and the unexpected responsibility of guiding two new attorneys through uncharted waters, I felt slightly overwhelmed.

When I met with my mentees for the first time, I had prepared the first two mentoring plans and felt more confident. I realized that my 20 years of experience as a Nevada attorney provided something useful to impart to my mentees. And best of all, my mentees proved receptive and perspicacious. The process put me in touch with my value as a mentor, exposed me to new attorneys and their difficult plight, and matched these new attorneys with needy pro bono clients. This practical requirement in the TIP program melded nicely with our traditional pro bono model: providing training and backup for any attorney willing to take a pro bono case from us.

After a few short months and the end of our mentoring plans, my mentees both agreed to take

two pro bono cases involving public housing tenants who wanted their security deposits back. The bridge between learning and practice had been crossed. On the way, two pro bono attorneys agreed to serve low income clients.

Pro bono does not mean work done for a client who does not pay; it means helping a disadvantaged individual seek redress in our justice system. A non-paying client is a debt owed to you; a pro bono client is a debt you owe to the client, our court system, and an orderly society.

David Olshan manages the Las Vegas Office of Nevada Legal Services, where he has worked for approximately 20 years.