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Pro Bono Spotlight – Philadelphia Lawyers For Social Equity

Tangible Experiences Through Expungement Work

By Chanel L. Lattimer

I work in the world of intangibles. I help clients obtain protection for words and expressions of ideas. As a transactional intellectual property attorney working at Cozen O'Connor, my practice focuses on the procurement and protection of intellectual property and the myriad of transactions related to “bundles of rights.” It is oftentimes theoretical and frequently challenging. I love my work and I know the benefit and value of securing IP protections for my clients.

I also do pro bono work, much of it related to my practice. But when looking to broaden my volunteer service, I wanted to do something a bit more tangible. I first learned about criminal records and expungement through a training offered at my firm by Community Legal Services. I was astonished to discover not only that more than half of people living in

Philadelphia's low-income, heavily minority neighborhoods have a criminal record history, but also that such records do not automatically disappear even if the charges are withdrawn by the district attorney or the court finds the individual not guilty. When more than 80 percent of employers and landlords perform background checks, having any type of criminal history, even without a conviction, can thwart individuals from gaining meaningful employment, loans and permanent housing.

On my own, I have successfully assisted five clients in expunging their criminal records by drafting and filing their petitions and appearing in court on their behalf, overcoming my “FOCA” – fear of court appearance. I even assisted one client, seeking to grow his driving business, in clearing up his traffic court records. Now I am a volunteer attorney for Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity, an organization that provides free legal

representation to lower-income Philadelphians whose criminal records hold them back from achieving their potential as productive, contributing citizens. Beyond offering expungement and pardon services, PLSE also seeks to educate elected and community leaders and empower under-resourced communities to seek a greater voice and needed legislative reform around criminal history records.

As a PLSE volunteer, I do the final reviews on dozens of petitions drafted by law students and Cozen paralegals prior to their filing with the court. PLSE files more than 2,200 petitions every year. The work that our paralegals and I do helps prevent the backlog of clients who come to PLSE for help. Soon, PLSE hopes to partner with local attorneys and paralegals and hold intake sessions in the city's low-income/high-arrest neighborhoods; bringing the promise

of help right to where clients live.

Any attorney can do expungement work (even the most transactional-minded!), and the results of this fairly simple process are tremendously satisfying. I still remember joyously hugging and congratulating my first client outside of the courtroom after the court granted our petition. Now he would be able to apply to nursing school and provide a better life for his two children. I treasure those moments.

The people who come to PLSE for help are doing their best to improve their and their families' lives. It is truly an honor to help them get their criminal records rightfully erased. I hope other attorneys, paralegals and law firms will join me and PLSE in doing this good work.

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