

## PRO BONO SPOTLIGHT - PHILADELPHIA LAWYERS FOR SOCIAL EQUITY

# Pardon Coaching: Do It For Shane, And For Yourself

■ By Lorraine Marie Simonis

From Steve Bannon to rapper Lil Wayne to Joe “The Tiger King” Exotic, pardons have made headline news these past months. But far removed from the media spotlight are the hundreds of Pennsylvanians every year who apply for pardons from our Governor. And yet, the underlying issue — the fact that tens of thousands of Pennsylvanians have felony records and suffer from them — is hugely consequential.

I know because I am a Pardon Coach for the Barristers Association and Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE) and I just helped a low-income Pennsylvanian apply for a pardon.

With the support of my firm, I began volunteering through PLSE last fall. When I was assigned my first client, I was excited but unsure of what to expect. Not only had I been previously unfamiliar with the pardon process — knowing little about Pennsylvania criminal law other than what I’d needed to pass the bar — but as a young associate, I was not used to managing a case or a client on my own. These concerns were completely unfounded. First, putting together the pardon packet turned out to be pretty straightforward, and PLSE and the Barristers were there to answer any and all questions. Second, developing the client relationship ended up being the most fulfilling part of the entire project.

“Shane,” my client, immediately impressed me with his determination to better his life. During our first of many calls, Shane told me about how, more than a decade ago, in his early twenties, he had turned to selling drugs after losing his job. He told me about how

he had struggled to find a job after prison. He told me about how he refused to return to selling drugs, despite the promise of fast cash. And he told me about how much obtaining a pardon would mean to him and his family: he is now 33 with a partner and small children, but because of his felony, he continues to struggle to

better life. No one should pay more than one price for a mistake, especially if they can admit that the choice they made was indeed a mistake.”

The Barristers Association of Philadelphia, in partnership with PLSE, has been working towards that goal by training volunteers such as myself to “coach”

individuals through the first step of the pardon process — just helping them fill out a four-page government form, assemble the required court documents, and gather letters of reference, certificates, diplomas,

and anything else to show who applicants are today, not who they once were, and how the past is keeping them from their potential.

For me, helping Shane only required a couple hours over a few months. For Shane, however, the end result could be life-changing. In Pennsylvania today, there are thousands of deserving individuals like Shane who would benefit greatly from attorney guidance in the pardon process and telling their stories. No matter your practice area, no matter the stage in your career, serving as a pardon coach is an easy yet impactful way to play a part in making our justice system and our society more just. And isn’t that why we all went to law school?

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find a good-paying job, with regular hours or health benefits.

A few weeks ago, I was finally able to submit Shane’s packet. That day, Shane called me. He was so grateful, and so excited. Not only was he excited about the possibility of a pardon, but it seemed like the application experience itself had enabled him to see the legal system as part of rebuilding his life, rather than just derailing it.

Having a felony on record — even one that is decades old and for a non-violent crime — comes with serious consequences. Felons are routinely denied jobs, promotions, credit, admission into schools, and housing — creating a vicious cycle for those trying to rebuild their lives. That is why expanding access to pardons is so critical. Pardons not only restore dignity, but also create opportunity and hope for individuals, their families and communities. As Shane himself said to me, “Everyone deserves a second chance at a