


PUBLIC
DEFENDER
CORPS

Because Quality Representation is Everyone's Right

FELLOW PROFILES
Class of 2012



Public Defender Corps Fellow

Lyla Askejian

Host Organization: Kentucky Department of Public Advocacy

Chief Defender: Ed Monahan

Type of Defense Work: Adult Felonies, Misdemeanors

City, State: Morehead, KY (Eastern Kentucky)

Law School: Thomas Jefferson School of Law



Q&A with Lyla

What inspires the work you do?

The mentors I had at the San Diego Public Defender's Office and the clients I worked with. Witnessing the injustice that many of the clients faced and learning from the public defenders who worked tirelessly to advocate on their behalf made me realize that fighting for those who are unable to afford representation is my passion.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

Being born and raised in California, I wanted to work in other areas of the country that need quality public defenders – areas where many people suffer from injustice due to their income, race or status in the community. The Department of Public Advocacy strives to train, educate and mentor attorneys to provide quality representation that is needed in the city of Morehead. I am looking forward to being a part of this effort.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

I want to serve a bigger purpose and change lives. When I chose to attend law school, I originally wanted to work in entertainment law, but my career counselor encouraged me to intern with the public defender. On my first day, I witnessed how quick our society is to pass judgment on the accused, yet fails to provide the proper resources for them to successfully move forward. From that moment on, I knew that I no longer wanted to be a transactional attorney; I want to make a difference for someone and hopefully leave an impact on our criminal justice system in doing so.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

The training and mentorship the fellowship provides, especially the fact that I will be able to share it with people who are just as excited for this incredible opportunity as I am. I am looking forward to continuing to grow in this field and be able to best represent my clients in Kentucky with the newfound knowledge and experience I will receive.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

Being a lawyer comes with great knowledge and resources, but I know I could have never become a lawyer if it weren't for my community. It is my duty to give back.

What is your hometown?

Glendale, California

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Rob Beckwith

Host Organization: Kentucky Department of Public Advocacy

Chief Defender: Ed Monahan

Type of Defense Work: Felonies, misdemeanors, juvenile

City, State: Richmond, KY

Law School: University of Georgia Law



Q&A with Rob

What inspires the work you do?

It never ceases to amaze me how so many people turn a blind eye to the way our criminal justice system takes advantage of indigent defendants. One would think a society such as ours would make efforts to protect the poor rather than adding to their plight, but it seems that everyone from the arresting officer to the state's attorney assumes their guilt. As a public defender, we have the opportunity to protect our clients when no one else will. They rely on us for their freedom, and we have the duty to fight for each and every one of them, no questions asked.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

Having spent my entire life in Georgia, I have seen the lingering effects of past injustices and southern prejudices that affect our clients on a regular basis. While we, as a society, have made major progress, there is still so much to be done in our criminal justice system, and I want to be a part of that change. That's why I chose to work in Kentucky. The Commonwealth's Department of Public Advocacy is a strong, passionate organization committed to doing things the right way. I knew almost instantly it was something I wanted to be a part of.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

I finished the first year of law school with so many questions about my future, as nothing really seemed to interest me. I needed more and found that in my work with indigent defendants through the criminal defense clinic. I loved the clients, the work, the feeling of doing something meaningful with my law degree. I knew then that I wanted to spend the rest of my life as a public defender, and I have spent the last two years doing everything I can in pursuit of that goal.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

The chance to learn this profession with other passionate, like-minded people is a unique opportunity that will prove invaluable in the future. There are sure to be numerous challenges in the coming years, but being able to share those experiences with others will help us get through anything. On top of that, so many of the great, young public defenders I have worked with praise the training we will receive through the Southern Public Defender Training Center. The Public Defender Corps gives me every opportunity to be successful in this profession and I am excited to be chosen as a fellow.

What is your hometown?

Jefferson, Georgia

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Michaela Beloiu

Host Organization: Kentucky Department of Public Advocacy

Chief Defender: Ed Monahan

Type of Defense Work: TBD

City, State: Shepherdsville, KY (near Louisville)

Law School: Golden Gate University School of Law



Q&A with Michaela

What inspires the work you do?

Wanting to make my family proud. My parents have sacrificed so much to ensure my success, and I want them to be proud of the person I have become.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

I chose to work in Kentucky after I had the opportunity to meet some of the attorneys at the Kentucky Department of Public Advocacy. Everyone was so friendly and welcoming that I immediately knew I could make Kentucky my new home. I am excited to learn more about the Southern culture and to make new friends.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

Throughout my life, many people have helped me and my family. Without their compassion, I would not be where I am today. Because of this, I knew early on that I wanted to be an attorney and help those who may never have had anyone stand up for them before. Through my education in college and law school, as well as my internships, I have realized that nowhere else is the need for a great attorney more important than where one's freedom is at stake. Wealthy people can afford these great attorneys but it is my conviction that indigent clients deserve the same caliber of representation because their freedom is just as valuable.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

Knowing that I am going to be trained by the most passionate and talented attorneys and being placed in a community that needs me.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

I made this connection in college when I saw how some lawyers have been able to enact positive change in our society. I knew that I wanted to have a similar impact.

What is your hometown?

Cupertino, California

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Carmen Brooks

Host Organization: Public Defender of Metropolitan Nashville & Davidson County

Chief Defender: Dawn Deaner

Type of Defense Work: Adult Misdemeanors and Felonies

City, State: Nashville, TN

Law School: Georgetown University Law School



Q&A with Carmen

What inspires the work you do?

A fundamental belief in equality, the Constitution and lawyers as social engineers.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

I have a strong commitment to working in indigent defense in the South. Although my first time in Nashville was when I went to find an apartment mid-May, as a music and food lover, Nashville seemed a great place to start my career.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

With a background in sociology, history and public policy, I have seen firsthand the ways that race, socioeconomics, mental health and gender intersect. That intersection has created second- and third-class citizens who are too often treated as “less than.” This is especially visible in the criminal courts – the disparity in sentencing, the lack of adequate treatment opportunities and the ways in which mental health diagnoses are ignored. Working in indigent defense allows me to push back against the creation of disparate citizenships and to help clients advocate for themselves and their best interests.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

The training and camaraderie.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

I attended school in Topeka, Kansas. From a young age, I was well aware of the role Charles Hamilton Houston played in training Thurgood Marshall and other lawyers as social engineers.

What is your hometown?

Denver, Colorado

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Robert Chan

Host Organization: Office of the Public Defender, Atlanta Judicial Circuit

Chief Defender: Katherine Mason

Type of Defense Work: Adult Misdemeanor

City, State: Augusta, GA

Law School: Emory Law



Q&A with Robert

What inspires the work you do?

My clients, my colleagues and the fight for social justice.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

As an intern, I've advocated for indigent defendants across Georgia – from Atlanta to Woodbine and from Marietta to Hinesville. The Augusta office, with its supportive environment and excellent training program, seemed like a great place to begin my career.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

The fundamental purpose of the legal profession is to serve. And it is those least privileged and those least sympathetic in the court of public opinion that most desperately needs a zealous advocate by their side. I want to be there to serve those most in need.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

Its mission to raise the standard of representation across the country.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

After seeing how lawyers can be a powerful force in effecting social change.

What is your hometown?

Plano, Texas

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Heather Gatnarek

Host Organization: Kentucky Department of Public Advocacy

Chief Defender: Ed Monahan

Type of Defense Work: Capital

City, State: Lexington, KY

Law School: Georgetown University Law Center



Q&A with Heather

What inspires the work you do?

My strong, justice-minded parents; the extraordinary and inspirational John Copacino; and the intrepid, resilient and brave Steven Barnes and his family in upstate New York.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

People facing the death penalty are almost always the most down-and-out of any criminal defendant – they have extraordinarily compelling mitigation stories that never fail to break my heart. These clients are the people that society is most willing to write off – so much so that we actually think about ending their lives – and I am proud to stand next to them in court to show that they are cared for no matter what mistakes they made.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

I can't imagine doing anything else. I will get to work with dynamic and engaging colleagues, represent the people who most need competent representation, and stand up for the ideals of justice and fairness that are so crucial to the legal profession.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

I am thrilled to join a community of young, dedicated public defenders. I'm so excited to learn from the amazing and seasoned faculty.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

Eight years ago, I was listening to a talk given by someone exonerated from death row and at one point he said, "The only people who were with me through this whole thing were my public defenders. If you have it in you to be one, please do, because we need you." I realized that my strong life-long opposition to the death penalty clearly intersected with the practice of law, and decided then to become a public defender.

What is your hometown?

Bow, New Hampshire

Public Defender Corps Fellow

D. Omavi Harshaw

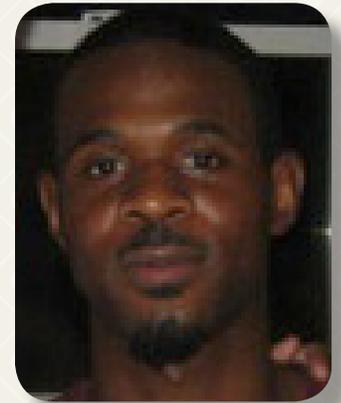
Host Organization: Orleans Public Defenders

Chief Defender: Derwyn Bunton

Type of Defense Work: Adult Felonies and Misdemeanors

City, State: New Orleans, LA

Law School: Harvard Law School



Q&A with Omavi

What inspires the work you do?

Our clients' awe-inspiring ability to retain their pride and poise in the face of a vindictive, hostile, biased criminal justice system that constantly vies for their liberty and dignity.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

Because they say New Orleans is hopeless. It is a downright hostile environment for indigent people accused of crimes and their advocates. The budget shortfalls, heavy caseloads and heavier sentences are all indicia that New Orleans is situated at the frontlines of the battle for the dignity and liberty of indigent communities targeted by the criminal justice system. Any soldier worth her or his salt would surely welcome the opportunity to fight on the frontlines.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

I believe that judgment rests with God and God alone. Being that "God don't make no junk," criminal behavior is the result of our shortcomings as a society rather than as individuals. The fact that our clients bear the brunt of the costs that accrue from these collective shortcomings is appalling. And my desire to remedy, rather than exacerbate, our societal shortcomings compels me to work with our clients to protect them from one of the, if not the, most vindictive criminal justice systems in the world.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

The opportunity to connect with like-minded people and learn from each other throughout the course of the fellowship.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

For me, there was never a choice. The goal has always been to help people ever since I left Arkansas for college. I decided to use the law as a means to help people around sophomore or junior year of college when I began to really understand the ways in which the criminal justice system disproportionately affects our minority population and the poor.

What is your hometown?

Little Rock, Arkansas

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Jessica Heyman

Host Organization: Juvenile Regional Services

Chief Defender: Josh Perry

Type of Defense Work: Juvenile

City, State: New Orleans, LA

Law School: New York University School of Law



Q&A with Jessica

What inspires the work you do?

My clients. Serving as someone's advocate is an incredible privilege; there is nothing as powerful as listening to someone's story and transforming it into a compelling legal narrative. And I've been lucky enough to learn from incredible attorneys, in my clinics and classes at NYU, at the Southern Center for Human Rights, and elsewhere. They taught me to balance empathy and perseverance, and how to transform outrage into searing—yet professional—motions and replies.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

New Orleans is an inspiring and humbling place. This is a city that has struggled, fought back and become reborn – it is resilient, to say the least. I know it's a place that will reinvigorate me when the battle feels too uphill and will spark new insights and innovations when the system seems too broken. I wanted to work with kids because I have seen how the doctrine of in loco parentis has come squarely into tension with zero tolerance and brutal school discipline policies, ratcheting up the consequences and herding should-be students into the school-to-prison pipeline. If we want to build a better future for New Orleans, we need to start with the kids.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

Because the United States' criminal justice system is indefensible. I spent years working on genocide and post-conflict issues in Africa and Latin America. Then I got to law school and saw that the systemic injustices I fought so hard against abroad were equally present here. I want to work toward a society that assists its most vulnerable rather than arrests them and toward a culture where incarceration is not the dominant institutional intervention into the lives of the poor. I believe that indigent defense—and in particular, juvenile defense—is the most crucial intervention point in that fight for change.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

I am excited to be trained by some of the best defenders in the country, and to be able to bring that knowledge back and apply it immediately in the courtroom. I'm thrilled to be joining a community of people who are equally dedicated to this calling and to have the opportunity over the next three years to hear about everyone's experiences, support each other on the night before our first hearing or jury trial and learn from one another. I can't wait to become part of the Public Defender Corps family.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

I came to law school because I saw firsthand how legal interventions can chip away at entrenched inequalities, and I wanted to use the law as a tool in favor of the vulnerable and the underrepresented. I believe deeply in the law as a force for social change—but we need to mobilize Gideon's Army. I am honored to be serving on the front lines.

What is your hometown?

Chicago, Illinois

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Kate Holtkamp

Host Organization: Knox County Public Defenders Community Law Office

Chief Defender: Mark Stephens

Type of Defense Work: Misdemeanor

City, State: Knoxville, TN

Law School: University of Tennessee



Q&A with Kate

What inspires the work you do?

The knowledge that our society is divided between haves and have-nots, and that this difference will impact every single aspect of a person's life, particularly when individuals encounter the conditions which make it substantially more likely that they will face prosecution and incarceration.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

As a native of East Tennessee, I'm thrilled to be able to continue to serve within my local community.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

Public defense allows attorneys to work closely with and have a significant, positive impact on the life of a single client while simultaneously working to change a broken, unjust system.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

The opportunity to receive such great training from experienced attorneys, and the opportunity to meet and join a community of young, like-minded, dedicated public defenders.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

I have always planned to work in the public interest field. After experimenting with a few different jobs in the public interest sector, I went to law school to become a public interest attorney.

What is your hometown?

Morristown, Tennessee

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Christine Madjar

Host Organization: Kentucky Department of Public Advocacy

Chief Defender: Ed Monahan

Type of Defense Work: Adult

City, State: Elizabethtown, KY (near Louisville)

Law School: Case Western Reserve University School of Law



Q&A with Christine

What inspires the work you do?

My family is my inspiration. My parents taught me humility, compassion, the indescribable reward of service to others and the benefit of giving everyone respect rather than passing judgment. They inspire me to use my law degree to serve individuals that need legal representation the most and make my impact on the world one client at a time.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

I couldn't be happier to have the opportunity to work and live in Kentucky. Visiting Louisville over the last three years has introduced me to great food, great music, and most importantly, University of Kentucky basketball. I am incredibly excited to work in Elizabethtown because I think it's a perfect fit for me. I'm eager to work in a smaller office in which I can work with and get to know my fellow public defenders more intimately, and also to be in a town the same size as Athens, Ohio, where I graduated from Ohio University. In Athens, I fell in love with community service and the down-to-earth people. I hope to build the same memories in Elizabethtown.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

I firmly believe that each person, regardless of wealth or circumstance, should be offered fair, efficient, and effective legal advice and representation. This passion and devotion for indigent criminal defense, however, solidified through an internship with the Arizona Capital Representation Project, which represents indigent persons on Arizona's death row. I was not only given the opportunity to work with clients during various stages of capital representation, but also the opportunity to research and better understand the shortcomings in our criminal justice system that affected each of our clients. I gained a deeper appreciation for defense attorneys who work tirelessly to give their clients what they deserve—fair representation and zealous advocacy, despite the nature of their crime or their inability to pay. My bosses encouraged continued and open discussions, providing a holistic view of the client in order to ensure that each client was given their best research efforts, their best and most well-crafted arguments, and their recognition and determination to challenge the injustices that so many clients face. I aspire to be that kind of defense attorney. I want the public to see my clients as human beings with the same rights and deserving the same respect as anyone else.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

I am most excited to be part of the Public Defender Corps community of talented and passionate defense attorneys who work tirelessly and diligently to effect change in indigent criminal defense. I am honored to have been chosen as a Public Defenders Corps Fellow.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

During the summer between my first and second year of law school, I took a class on death penalty issues and joined the Mock Trial team. My professor and Mock Trial coaches showed me the numerous rewards of public interest work. It was then that I realized my own passion for indigent defense litigation.

What is your hometown?

Strongsville, Ohio

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Christine Malumphy

Host Organization: Wake County Public Defender

Chief Defender: Bryan Collins

Type of Defense Work: Adult

City, State: Raleigh, NC

Law School: University of California, Berkeley School of Law (Boalt Hall)



Q&A with Christine

What inspires the work you do?

A constant feeling of rancor at narratives of injustice. Coming from a low-income background and watching family members struggle with the indignity of economic inequality has made me particularly susceptible to stories of struggle. Whatever the axis of oppression, tales of unfairness and mistreatment leave me feeling angry. Sometimes anger leads folks to the dark side; I'm hoping to redirect mine toward keeping people out of jail.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

I'm excited to be returning to the South! I've been more or less wandering the earth for the past ten years. As much as I love moving from place to place, the South feels the most like home. The Raleigh area is steeped in the bittersweet history, hospitality and hope that epitomize the region. I look forward to working with clients, their families and their communities in navigating a system that has historically done a dismal job providing justice.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

A wise professor of mine, and former public defender, said that people who are particularly fair-minded and above the fray should be prosecutors. People who are fighters should be public defenders. I am the latter. After working my first summer at a public defender office in California, I was fascinated by criminal law and infuriated at the treatment of indigent defendants. I love everything about indigent defense – meeting clients, investigating cases, arguing all the time in court and doing it all for a good cause.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

My new peers. The biggest challenge I associate with being a public defender is feeling undertrained and overwhelmed. I look forward to being a member of the community that the Public Defender Corps is building. I'm confident that sharing stories and experiences with these amazing folks will make me a more effective and happy advocate.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

As a pre-tween, I became addicted to John Grisham novels. I might be a bit embarrassed about that fact now, but in retrospect popular culture's portrayal of the law was critical in capturing my imagination. It was *A Time to Kill* that led me to *To Kill A Mockingbird*. It was fiction that sparked my interest in real world civil rights heroes like Thurgood Marshall and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I was surprised later on in life when I learned that lawyers were more or less universally reviled. Who could hate the profession that brought us Atticus Finch and Clarence Darrow? Because I've always associated public interest work with the law, I can't really picture myself taking any other path.

What is your hometown?

Augusta, Georgia

Public Defender Corps Fellow

J. Rex Marvel

Host Organization: Mecklenburg County Office of the Public Defender

Chief Defender: Kevin Tully

Type of Defense Work: Juvenile, Adult, Felony and Misdemeanor

City, State: Charlotte, NC

Law School: University of Cincinnati College of Law



Q&A with Rex

What inspires the work you do?

I have been fortunate to intern with many caring and committed public advocates in Northern Kentucky and Charlotte, North Carolina. Individuals who have committed their lives to public defense are an inspiration and have guided me toward this wonderful career.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

The Mecklenburg Public Defender's Office is an amazing organization of public defenders committed to their clients. It is a supportive community where I can learn and grow as a dedicated advocate.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

During my first year of law school a public defender represented my mother; ultimately helping her through one of the most difficult times in her life. That summer I clerked for the Court of Appeals in Botswana working on death penalty reviews. In that country, you have no right to counsel. Although the judges did their best to maintain impartiality and to respect the claims of the defendants, the defendants struggled to represent themselves against the state. Trials were in English and judges were foreign. Most of the defendants were uneducated and spoke little or no English. I came to the clear conclusion that having a knowledgeable and caring advocate is essential for the preservation of justice. Public defenders hold a key role in the American system of justice. I choose this career because I wholeheartedly believe it is a crucial career supporting people in need of assistance.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

For me, I am most excited about joining an organization committed to social change. Beyond this, the camaraderie, support and first class training from the Public Defender Corps are invaluable for someone pursuing a career in public defense.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

In high school, I went on several church mission trips across the country as well as to Mexico. In college, I was part of several civil rights campaigns and volunteered with the local homeless community. I came to law school to make a difference in people's lives. During my internships at public advocate offices I found a career where I could make a difference. Public interest, and specifically work as a public defender, is the best way for me to fulfill that goal.

What is your hometown?

Yulee, Florida

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Katherine Oberembt

Host Organization: Shelby County Office of the Public Defender

Chief Defender: Stephen Bush

Type of Defense Work: Adult

City, State: Memphis, TN

Law School: Yale Law School



Q&A with Katherine

What inspires the work you do?

My parents, who raised me to believe that I have a responsibility to spend my life working to improve the lives of others. I've also been inspired by the many lawyers I've met who have selflessly devoted their lives to representing indigent clients, especially my professor and mentor Steven Bright.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

After spending my law school summers working in Texas and Mississippi, I saw firsthand how the systemic problems facing indigent defendants – poverty, racism and disadvantage – are especially severe in the southern United States. I hope that I can be part of the solution by working in Memphis.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

I wanted to use my law degree to help those who are most in need and work in a place where the need is greatest. No one is in greater need than indigent defendants in the South. I hope that, by representing my clients effectively and zealously, I can make a positive difference in their lives and help give a voice to those who are so often ignored, neglected and oppressed.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

I'm excited about being part of a group of people who share my values and truly believe in the importance of this work. I'm also excited to have access to a community of talented and dedicated mentors who will provide me with the training and resources I need to become an effective advocate.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

Ever since I was very young, I was deeply disturbed by the horrors perpetrated by our country's criminal justice system, especially the infliction of the death penalty. As I grew up, I came to believe that representing individual clients is the most valuable thing I can do to change the system.

What is your hometown?

Galesburg, Illinois

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Campbell Roth

Host Organization: Monroe County Office of the Public Defender

Chief Defender: Timothy Donaher

Type of Defense Work: Adult, Juvenile, Immigration, Felonies, Misdemeanors

City, State: Rochester, NY

Law School: Washington College of Law, American University



Q&A with Campbell

What inspires the work you do?

My professors and mentors Cynthia Jones, Binny Miller and Jenny Roberts for being models of the unwavering, client-centered advocacy we should all strive to provide.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

I have heard great things about both the city of Rochester and the Office of the Public Defender. The Office's training and mentoring are powerful tools in a community that has been hit hard economically. I'm excited to work with attorneys with such an obvious commitment to indigent defense and civil rights.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

In college, I took a class with a professor whose students worked with the Innocence Project. I had a front-row seat to the failure of the criminal justice process. I knew some of those exonerated inmates had at one point relied on a public defender. During this experience, I vowed that if I did go to law school it would be with the goal of providing a committed and competent defense for these men and women from inception of a case and possibly saving them from decades of injustice.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

The chance to start out in a "class" of fellow graduates that are excited about the work ahead of us as we learn from seasoned defenders. The knowledge and support we will receive is going to be second-to-none. I'm thrilled at the opportunity.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

I always knew public service was how I would use my law degree. I love working with people and feeling as though I may have helped them, even in a small way. To me, a successful outcome for a client is a more tangible and more gratifying gift than private sector work could ever provide.

What is your hometown?

Chicago, Illinois

Public Defender Corps Fellow

David Rubin

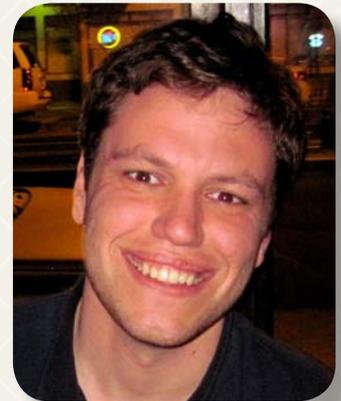
Host Organization: 15th Judicial District Public Defenders Office, Lafayette, LA

Chief Defender: G. Paul Marx

Type of Defense Work: Adult

City, State: Lafayette, LA

Law School: The University of San Francisco School of Law



Q&A with David

What inspires the work you do?

My grandmother always taught me about equality and fairness and always believed so strongly in a sense of justice. Her belief in service to her community played a big part in my decision to choose a career in public interest.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

The public defender community in Lafayette, and in Louisiana at large, is in a transition period. It is an exciting time to be a part of a small but growing office that will provide aggressive and innovative defense for our clients.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

The criminal justice system is so strongly tilted in favor of law enforcement and the prosecution in particular communities. Working in indigent defense allows me the opportunity to help even out that imbalance and to fight for people who are often voiceless and forgotten.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

I am particularly excited about joining a network of energetic public defenders as well as being able to quickly make a difference in a community with a great deal of need.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

Early on in life I realized the potential for influence and change that comes with being a lawyer. As I grew older, and particularly during my time in law school, I understood how much influence an individual lawyer can have on the life of a single client, and I knew that was the best way I could serve my community.

What is your hometown?

Monticello, New York

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Laurie Sansbury

Host Organization: Shelby County Office of the Public Defender

Chief Defender: Stephen Bush

Type of Defense Work: Adult

City, State: Memphis, TN

Law School: University of Alabama School of Law



Q&A with Laurie

What inspires the work you do?

My hope is that by standing up for my clients, I can make the system a little fairer.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

Memphis has so many opportunities for positive change, and I am honored to be a part of this process.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

Before I went to law school, I knew I would be a public defender. The depth of the injustice in our criminal justice system appalls me, and I cannot imagine a better way to fight for improvement than to stand up for my clients every day.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

The most exciting thing to me is the possibility for positive change. I am honored to work in a community of public defenders who seek to improve not only the quality of representation for individual clients but for the criminal justice system as a whole.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

I've always been active in social justice communities, but after college I worked in the private sector. It took me years to realize that this work left me unfulfilled. I am grateful for the friends who supported my decision to change careers, and I am grateful for the opportunities I've had to work with such wonderful lawyers and fellow students who are also committed to public interest work.

What is your hometown?

Panama City, Florida

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Maya Sheppard

Host Organization: Knox County Public Defender's Community Law Office

Chief Defender: Mark Stephens

Type of Defense Work: Adult

City, State: Knoxville, TN

Law School: University of Washington School of Law



Q&A with Maya

What inspires the work you do?

Clients.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

I chose this career because of a strong belief that the American over-emphasis on punishment and incarceration lies at the root of (and exacerbates) race- and class-based oppression, diverts attention and funding from direly needed social services, and contributes to a culture of over-policing in poor communities and communities of color. I am dedicated to undermining this punitive emphasis, and I draw fulfillment from working with clients to fight their criminal cases while addressing basic needs that are not met by the criminal justice system.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

The opportunity for intensive training and the connection to an inspiring community of public defenders. Also, I am very excited about the fact that this group of fierce and talented people will be holding me accountable in my work.

What is your hometown?

Oakland, California

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Kevin Valdez

Host Organization: 15th Judicial District Public Defenders Office, Lafayette, LA

Chief Defender: G. Paul Marx

Type of Defense Work: Adult, Felony, Misdemeanor

City, State: Lafayette, LA

Law School: Washington University in St. Louis School of Law



Q&A with Kevin

What inspires the work you do?

The people. While interning at a couple of public defender offices, I met clients from different states, backgrounds and cultures. They came from very different walks of life, but all of them needed a lawyer to help them through one of the most harrowing moments of their lifetime. Knowing that these people need the assistance and support of a good defense attorney, inspires me to do this work.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

After visiting Lafayette, I was impressed with the office and the attorneys that I met there. The office has been undergoing a transformation in the last few years in order to ensure that their clients receive a fair and just trial. I am really looking forward to being part of that transformation and doing all I can to help the people of Lafayette.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

After interning at three public defender offices, the choice to pursue a career in indigent defense seemed natural. I love the work, and I love working with the clients. I find working in indigent defense both rewarding and fulfilling. I can't see myself doing anything else.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

The opportunity to work with so many people that are truly devoted to indigent defense.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

During my first summer of law school, I worked with children at the Legal Services of Eastern Missouri. I was enthused by the dedication and devotion that the attorneys at the office had for helping low-income clients. The passion that the attorneys brought to their work inspired me to continue working in public interest.

What is your hometown?

Olney, Maryland

Public Defender Corps Fellow

Sara Whitaker

Host Organization: Public Defender Corporation for the 13th Judicial Circuit

Chief Defender: George Castelle

Type of Defense Work: TBD

City, State: Charleston, WV

Law School: Northwestern University



Q&A with Sara

What inspires the work you do?

First, I hate bullies, and there is no bigger bully than our criminal justice system. Poor families and communities are torn apart by longer sentences and fewer opportunities for rehabilitation and re-entry. Second, I was raised by a single mom who never finished college. My grandparents are Mexican immigrants who came to the United States without papers. I love my family, and if one of them were to hit hard times, they would need a public defender.

Why did you choose to work in this community?

Charleston, West Virginia is where my husband, my son and I want to put down roots. My husband is from West Virginia, I have extended family in Kentucky, and we both love the pace of West Virginia. The state is also a place where there are a lot of opportunities to make a difference in the areas of prison reform, criminal justice work and education.

Why did you choose a career in indigent defense?

Last summer and fall, I interned with the Cook County Public Defender's Office in Chicago as part of the Felony Trial Division and Homicide Task Force. Until then, I had never experienced what it was like to truly look forward to going to work. I loved each element of the job: the endless research, the irreverent underdog mentality of the other public defenders, interviewing and getting to know clients, and the challenge of being in the courtroom.

What excites you most about Public Defender Corps?

I respect the sacrifices that Corps members have made to work in the public good and live out their values immediately after law school. What most excites me about the Public Defender Corps is the chance to meet, lean on and learn from the other Corps members.

When did you make the connection between becoming a lawyer and public interest work?

Before I enrolled in law school, I worked in sports marketing in London. Though my job was intellectually stimulating, and in some ways fun, I wanted more. I wanted the values I held in my private life to match the work I did in my public life. That's what fueled me to shift gears and enroll in law school to work in the public interest.

What is your hometown?

Hollywood, California