Stepping Up: UA Law Prof Continues Family's Volunteer Spirit Through Legal Services Center

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Stacy Butler’s [1] parents and grandparents raised her to understand the value of volunteering, and in the process, fostered her passion for giving back to the community as a lawyer and professor of practice at the UA James E. Rogers College of Law.

Butler’s grandfather, a longtime Rotary Club member and church leader, used to take Butler with him when he delivered meals to homebound people. She remembers helping her grandmother, a docent at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum and a volunteer wildlife rehabilitator, feed and care for injured wildlife.

Her father volunteered as a coach for her brothers’ soccer and baseball teams for years. Her mother, an active volunteer, worked as a school psychologist for 30 years, most of that time at low-income schools working with special needs kids.

As Butler explored potential careers, she was drawn to the legal profession, where performing pro bono work — done voluntarily and without payment — is encouraged. She received her bachelor’s degree from Trinity?University and then attended the James E. Rogers College of Law.

"Even before law school, I was really interested in the social justice piece of what lawyers do, specifically the capacity of lawyers to donate their time and what social change can be delivered in that way," she said.

Butler didn't wait until graduation to get started giving back. As a law student, she helped launch a program called VLP Advocates, which connected volunteer lawyers with volunteer law students. Over the next 15 years, 1,100 students assisted more than 13,000 clients through the VLP Advocates program.

"Volunteer law students were helping financially eligible clients," or people living at or below the federal poverty guidelines, Butler said. "That was kind of my 'baby' in law school, growing that program."

After graduation, Butler served as a law clerk to Judge William C. Canby Jr. in the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, then spent three years as an associate at the law firm of DeConcini McDonald Yetwin & Lacy. Most recently, she served 12 years as the permanent law clerk to U.S. District Judge Jennifer G. Zipps.

Through the years, Butler and her colleagues became aware that more legal services related to civil matters were needed in the community.

"We saw a huge unmet need in terms of access to justice," Butler explained. "Less than 4
percent of the low-income population that needed and qualified for service was receiving it. And because Tucson had only one civil legal service provider, conflict of interest issues often arose, particularly in family law. In divorce cases, for example, the legal aid office could represent one of the parties? either the husband or the wife? but not both. That potentially left one spouse without legal services, which is particularly troubling if the case involves domestic violence.

The other problem Butler saw was a lack of infrastructure to connect volunteer lawyers to the clients who needed their pro bono services. While plenty of Tucson lawyers were willing to volunteer, they didn't have an easy way to reach the people who needed their help, she said.

"All of those issues and 20 years of hitting brick walls prompted the launch of Step Up to Justice," she said. "Step Up to Justice was designed to expand the reach of civil legal services in the community and harness an untapped resource in the form of volunteer lawyers, of which we have many."

Step Up to Justice opened its doors in January 2017 with an operating budget of $215,000 and three full-time staff members. In its first year, Step Up to Justice served more than 1,000 people.

"That was a 20 percent expansion of free civil legal services in our community," said Butler, who is president of the Step Up to Justice board of directors. "A volunteer model can deliver a lot more service at a much lower cost. I think Step Up to Justice is perfectly positioned to be a model of how we can do things differently."

While her work with Step Up to Justice falls outside of her duties at the UA, the two are connected: UA law students are part of the volunteer force behind Step Up to Justice. Students collect information from clients, determine their financial eligibility and help clarify their legal issues. As Step Up to Justice's programming expands, students will have the opportunity to work with clients under the supervision of volunteer attorneys, Butler said.

"Involving students in Step Up to Justice was always part of the plan. That's really part of the model," Butler said. "Students who volunteer in law school become attorneys who volunteer. It's really about training the future volunteer base."

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Links:
[1] https://law.arizona.edu/stacy-butler