



WHY I PRACTICE IN PUBLIC INTEREST LAW

BY YONATAN ZAMIR

I BECAME A PUBLIC INTEREST LAWYER because as I grew up, I was taught that America is a country of laws, norms, and principles and, at least according to the Pledge of Allegiance, of “justice for all.” I also learned of the terrible injustice and the unfairness that is also part of our system, and strive to improve it.

My parents instilled in me something tangible that I carry and use each day: a love of people and a desire to use my skills and abilities to help them. Just out of college, with that spirit in mind, I volunteered for the AmeriCorps National Service program, and was stationed with the American Red Cross of Greater Chicago to provide disaster response during the overnight hours. That experience was nothing short of stunning. Serving victims of home fires and other calamities in the sub-zero Chicago winter, I was hit with the harsh reality that in the wealthiest, most powerful nation in history, an astonishing number of people live in or near poverty, with no real “cushion,” no insurance (monetary or otherwise) to fall back on when life deals an unexpectedly harsh blow. Though I’d grown up just a few miles away in the suburbs, my life contrasted significantly from lives of those I provided emergency services to because of the very great privilege that my parents had provided for me—the very real “cushion” that their sacrifices, hard work, and yes, status as white Americans had bestowed, and which I continue to benefit from.

After getting a taste of what it means to practice law in the public interest, I attended law school, where I was a student in a housing-focused litigation clinic. Representing people who were marginalized by their status as immigrant day laborers, I helped them organize and use the legal system to address the horrible



conditions in their apartments—apartments they paid a lot of money to live in. After a few years at the Legal Aid Society in the Bronx, I was fortunate to work in Congress during the height of the foreclosure crisis. I was given a front row seat to how many facets of the power in our great nation can and do coordinate to work together, and also how we still manage to fail so many. Yet, I missed the direct service that a “legal aid” lawyer provides.

Today, many of the clients I serve as an attorney with New Haven Legal Assistance Association are struggling in the grip of poverty. They are entitled to assert their rights and obligations under the law, and this is a good part of what I help my clients do each day. I am proud to be able to engage with my clients, to tell them that I’m their lawyer—I am the person they can count on to help them get through the difficult circumstances they’ve been dealt. My job is listen to them, provide them legal expertise, and help them pass through the storm of legal troubles they face. ■

Yonatan Zamir joined New Haven Legal Assistance Association (NHLAA) in 2014 as a staff attorney in the housing unit, where he represents clients in a wide range of housing matters, including eviction proceedings and preserving access to affordable housing. Before joining NHLAA, he served as a fellow with Hofstra University School of Law’s Law Reform Advocacy Clinic, and previously, as counsel to a member of Congress and to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform of the US House of Representatives. Prior to working in Congress, Attorney Zamir was a staff attorney at the Legal Aid Society of New York. Originally from Chicago, he earned his BA from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and his JD from Hofstra University School of Law, where he received the Excellence in Housing Clinic Award. He is a proud AmeriCorps alumnus. Attorney Zamir is admitted to practice in Connecticut, New York, and the District of Columbia.