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Robert T. Matsui: Writing on Public Service

Reflections on My Internship Experiences and the Spirit of Public Service

The spirit of public service is the ability to recognize the intrinsic value of our fellow humans. To serve wholeheartedly and with true compassion, one cannot define a person solely by their economic status, drug usage, or criminal record; doing so leads one to diminish or deny their dignity as humans. One must see in others a *person*—a person who has just as much value as one's mother, closest friend, or oneself. Without this vision of our fellow humans, it becomes easy to spend a life dedicated solely to one's own interests. It becomes difficult to recognize that we have a duty to defend the well being of others.

Interning at the Office of the Attorney General of the District of Columbia (OAG DC), I have had the privilege of observing a public servant who I believe truly embodied the spirit of public service. The judge I observed presided over the courtroom for five defendants who had plead guilty to driving under the influence. From my previous experiences with governmental entities, time and efficiency always seemed to supersede personal and meaningful interactions. To my surprise, the judge spoke extensively and patiently to the group of defendants in a way that revealed a sense of personal responsibility towards the defendants and to the D.C. community. It was very apparent that he treated the pleading as an opportunity to help the defendants learn from their mistake instead of as simply the time to deliver their sentence. He shared with the defendants that, from his extensive experience with DUI cases, he knew they were likely all working folks with no prior record. Nevertheless, they needed to accept responsibility for their actions, for they could have seriously harmed others in their community.

To demonstrate the serious and irreversible repercussions of driving while intoxicated, he took the time to share a moving story of a young DUI victim who had testified in his courtroom of the immense suffering she had endured. The judge also spoke extensively with each defendant about his or her life circumstances, the conditions leading up to the offense, and the ways in which he might allow for reasonable accommodations to their individual hardships when he delivered their sentences. I was inspired by the way in which the judge treated the defendants as people, and not just as criminals, and seemed to genuinely care about them. I believe that our criminal justice system would much more effectively serve offenders and the general public if this judge's approach were to be more widely utilized.

Preparing to serve the public effectively in a career in public interest law, I have utilized my college years to establish a solid understanding of the complexities of domestic poverty. However, one of the most important ways in which I have enhanced my understanding of poverty and to eventually serve the poor has been to learn from the very people living in poverty. Interning at a various anti-poverty organizations in San Diego, I have had the opportunity to befriend and work with individuals who have faced unbelievable suffering and despair. Academia has given me an understanding of the politics of poverty, but my internship experiences have given me a glimpse of the lived experience of poverty--something that I could never learn from a classroom.

Interning with a welfare law attorney in San Diego, I have witnessed the resilience of a disabled woman caring for three disabled family members while navigating our dehumanizing welfare system. Canvassing a neighborhood with a local grassroots organization, I have seen the pride in the eyes of a young Mexican man selling ice cream from a cart as he told me about his

young son he supported from afar. Interning at an organization that provided legal aid to non-unionized workers, I have seen and heard the distress in a mother who was fired from her position as a nurse's aid for taking time off to tend to her child's illness. I have also seen the hopelessness in an already impoverished mother who discovered that both of her teenage daughters would soon be bringing children into the world.

These experiences outside of the classroom have shown me that poverty is as much about hunger and material insufficiencies as about living in constant uncertainty and hopelessness. The people I have met have shown me that the popular notion that the poor simply lack the will power to pull themselves out of poverty is sorely incorrect. My experiences have also shown me that structural explanations for poverty only go so far; just like everyone else poor people make unwise decisions too. Furthermore, my internship experiences have demonstrated the absurdity of the "American Dream," the notion that success is attainable once one pulls oneself up by the bootstraps. On the contrary, I have seen that some are born on the top of the socioeconomic ladder, while others are born so far below the first rung that it takes extraordinary efforts simply to begin the journey upwards. Growing up in a middle class community, my peers and I took it for granted that we would have SAT-preparatory courses, receive help from tutors, and get into good colleges. During my internships I have found teenagers who are so weighed down by the hardships of living in poverty that even thinking about college and their future is a feat.

I have learned about such a teenager while interning at the OAG DC. Reading the case file of "Megan," who was being prosecuted for the possession of a weapon at school, was particularly saddening. Her counselor's evaluation of her background and stressors revealed an unbelievably hard life. Megan's parents and brother were all addicted to drugs. She was a victim

of incest and had consequently run away from home multiple times. Megan had been attacked at school, moving her to carry a weapon to defend herself. She felt like those who were supposed to be closest to her did not care about her. These life circumstances were clearly reflected in her school performance; Megan was failing her classes, and her standardized test scores were in the single-digit percentile points. When asked, she had no considerations about her future.

Reading about her life reminded me of the invisibility of children like Megan and of the waning commitment to public service among the American people. Many Americans are highly skeptical of the use of taxpayer dollars to fund welfare, but people do not realize that most people receiving public assistance are actually children. 17.6 percent of American children are living in poverty--almost 13 million children in America (U.S. Census Bureau, *Poverty: 2005 Highlights*). Child poverty is largely unknown to the voters and taxpayers who influence welfare policy and funding for social services. Unsurprisingly, funding for these safety nets have been continuously cut in the past decade, and there are millions of children like Megan in the U.S. suffering from crime and violence, drug-addicted parents, and hunger and malnourishment. Clearly, we are failing our children. This failure, I believe, stems largely from American individualism, which runs counter to the spirit of public service. As the National Commission on Public Service noted, the "notion of public service...draws an indifferent response from today's young people and repels many of the country's leading private citizens" (Report of the National Commission on Public Service, 2003). Raised to value independence and personal achievement, Americans are not sufficiently encouraged to seek out individuals in need of a helping hand. Raised under the banner of the "American Dream," Americans view poverty as the result of personal flaws in character and will power. There is scarcely a desire to rub shoulders with the

poor and homeless, let alone to utilize our resources, skills, and time to serve those at the margins of our society.

I believe that it is possible to instill a spirit of public service in Americans if there were more opportunities to interact with and relate to people who are different from themselves. Connecting on a personal level with the poor could be the first step in developing compassion for the underprivileged and a sense of duty towards others. This motivated me to create a service learning event for other UCDC participants here in Washington D.C. I noticed that many UCDC participants only socialized with one another and would pass by the homeless without a word or glance. I wanted to find a way to connect my fellow UCDC students with people different from themselves and to integrate community service into their time away from their internships. Luckily, a local homelessness recovery program run by Samaritan Inns provided the perfect opportunity to fulfill my two goals. Around twenty UCDC students cooked meals for the recovery program's formerly homeless residents and then socialized with the residents over the meals. They were able to connect with men and women who had experienced extreme poverty and addiction to drugs. Though the events were relatively brief, I hope that the UCDC students who participated were able to learn from the formerly homeless individuals with whom they dined. I also hope these service learning events were able to foster a spirit of public service among my peers.

All in all, my experience in the UCDC program has only furthered my ambition to use public interest law as a way to advocate for the rights of the underprivileged and to ensure that America's shrinking social safety net will sufficiently protect our society's most vulnerable

members. I will never forget the lessons I have learned through the UCDC program and individuals who have shown me the value in living a life committed to public service.