

Virginia Raymond

Five years ago, Virginia Raymond was teaching Mexican-American studies at the University of Texas at Austin while also directing an oral history project on the death penalty. Although she was a licensed attorney, she was not actively practicing law. That all changed in 2012, when she offered to assist with preparing Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals applications. Since August 2014, Raymond has focused on representing asylum-seekers who are detained in Karnes City.

Why do you focus your pro bono work on immigration issues?

It's a question of scale. There are hundreds of refugees locked up. They don't understand the insanely complicated immigration laws; most have no money to hire lawyers, and they are not entitled to appointed counsel.

What are some of the obstacles you experience in your work? How do you overcome them?

Imagine the worst thing that ever happened to you; imagine that it is a recent traumatic event that you haven't yet fully processed. Imagine further that you are afraid that if you talk about that event, beloved family members or friends, neighbors, or co-workers will suffer. Now imagine that you are also locked up with your every move monitored by uniformed people, that the water makes you gag, and that your kids are getting sick, losing weight, and asking you questions for which you have no answers. Do you tell your story, neatly organized in a coherent, chronological order to the first or second or third or fourth stranger who asks? Even if you could remember all the nauseating details, every cell in your body is screaming "danger" and telling you to keep quiet.

I am one person participating in a much larger movement for human rights. We work in communities to support refugees, expose abuses, and actively resist family detention. This isn't a lawyer-support staff model. It's hundreds of people pitching in.

How have your efforts affected your general law practice?

I don't have to advertise. I can't begin to answer all the phone calls that come in—and no, they are not all expecting free services.

What has been the most surprising aspect of pro bono work?

Experienced immigration lawyers have welcomed, mentored, encouraged, consoled, and supported me with warmth and generosity. So many knowledgeable people have answered so many questions. The profound sense of shared mission among advocates for refugees and immigrants moves me.

What do you see as the biggest misconception about pro bono?

I don't think of "pro bono" work versus other work, so maybe the notion that they are two different beasts is itself a misconception.

What would you say to someone who is thinking about taking on pro bono cases?

It would be the same advice for any project or occupation—ask yourself, whose work do you most admire? Whose ways of moving through the world do you wish to emulate? Then find a way of spending time with those people, watching, asking questions, and learning. Stay away from cynics and naysayers. **TBJ**

