

She told me that her name was Rose. She was hard of hearing, and her English was not perfect, but with some difficulty we managed to fill out her consent forms. She had questions: she had no health insurance, and what about the rumors she had heard about the vaccine's side effects? I tried to help, but there were other patients waiting. I was eighteen and unqualified to work in a pharmacy, yet I had been recruited to help mitigate the flood of people seeking the new COVID-19 vaccine at the height of the pandemic.

Despite being thrown into the fray with little training, I quickly recognized that the most significant part of the job was not the prescriptions or insurance policies—it was the human element. I heard stories like Rose's over and over again, witnessing how difficult it can be to navigate the complicated bureaucracy of the medical system. I felt powerless as I watched patients struggle, and sometimes all I could do was listen.

Those experiences remained with me, and for a long time none of the career paths that I encountered spoke to me—that is, until last summer, when I interned at the Albuquerque public defender's office.

Like at the pharmacy, our clients were at a disadvantage, facing a vast, bureaucratic system that continually fails marginalized people. Interviewing clients before their arraignments, I realized that many were penalized for elements that were out of their control. The mother who would lose her job if she remained in custody, the veteran who could not appear in court because his disability prevented him from walking: these stories stay with me, yet they are far from unique. I felt that same hopelessness when recognizing the deep-rooted problems that left people helpless to resist the power of the law.

At the same time, I had the privilege to watch public defenders make real differences in their clients' lives. Whether it was through ensuring they could access necessary medication while in custody, arguing for their release so they could return to their families, protesting violations of their rights, or simply treating them with dignity and respect, the attorneys I met fought hard for people who had no other advocate. I admired their relentless advocacy as well as the depths of their empathy for all their clients, particularly those whom society frequently deems unworthy of empathy.

I believe that indigent defense plays a necessary part in ensuring that everyone has equal access to legal representation and in mitigating inequalities in the criminal justice system. I believe in the power that legal advocacy has to change lives. But more than that, I believe in the value of treating people with dignity. I know that I cannot singlehandedly transform the world, but I have witnessed the way public defenders can transform an individual's life, and this fall I will attend Berkeley Law with the aim of becoming an advocate for others in the same way.