

When I was 11 years old, my mom's uncle was arrested and charged with murder. I didn't think much of it, not because I was heartless, but because I vaguely remembered meeting him. To me, he was just a distant family member who was occasionally brought up in conversation and unfortunately made a terrible mistake. But his mistake would give me my first glimpse of the legal system and would allow me to see exactly what lawyers were capable of.

In the days following the arrest, my mother and I drove around from city to city visiting countless lawyers to speak with them about her uncle's case. When we arrived, my mom always asked the same questions: "Can you help?", "Is he going to get out?", "How much do you charge?" To which the lawyer's response was always a seemingly vague one, "Maybe", "I can't say for certain", or "It depends." I didn't understand, why we were asking people for answers who didn't seem to have any. But, being the respectful kid I was, I sat quietly and listened. The more they talked, the more interested I became. The lawyers were using words that I had only ever heard on TV, like misdemeanor and felony. They mentioned random numbers in combination with letters and talked about how that number might not apply. I had absolutely no idea what any of that meant. I had so many questions, but I was too shy and too young to ask.

A few days after visiting all the lawyers and speaking with just about everybody in the extended family, my mother and I made the long drive to visit my mom's uncle in jail. My mother and I walked through several metal detectors, waited in countless lines, and took a shuttle to where we would finally get to see him. When we arrived, my mom looked through the glass and picked up the phone. She greeted her uncle, chatted for a bit, went over his case, and then proceeded to hand me the phone. He smiled, cracked a couple jokes about his newly shaven head, and then he asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I thought back to all our visits and all the conversations my mother had with the lawyers, then I looked at my mom and back at

her uncle. I was not sure of how my comment would be received, but I mustered up the courage and told him anyway, “I want to be a lawyer.”

After a few months, everything seemed to return to normal. I went back to being preoccupied with soccer and video games, never hearing about my mom’s uncle, until my mother was arrested. When I first heard the news, I stood in disbelief. My mother was not a criminal. There was no reason for her to be arrested. My dad fumbled through his phone and scrambled to find the number of a person who would come to my mother’s rescue. I had seen lawyers before, I had heard them speak, but I never realized what they were capable of until the day of her arrest. After our lawyer, Mr. Saginaw, made a few calls, he was able to release my mom from custody and prevent any further questioning. Mr. Saginaw informed us that my mother had been arrested because she refused to testify against her uncle. This tall suited man used but a few words to accomplish the release of my mother. And a few days later, another suited man would use his words to put my mother’s uncle in prison.

Since then, I have learned to use my words more meticulously. I’m not the shy boy I once was and am no longer afraid to speak up and ask questions. I have met and worked with the type of people who I once thought had no answers and I now understand they were simply being thoughtful and scrupulous with their word choices. The words that lawyers use still intrigue me, but they don’t leave me puzzled as they once did. I have seen the power that lawyers have through my experiences with my mother and her uncle as well as through traveling to court and working with them. I hope to one day be able to use my words, knowledge, and influence to help mothers, uncles, and families facing their own legal challenges.

While drifting through the pages of an old favorite, my mind paused when the protagonist was offered a choice, “Would you rather be good or smart?” I continued, anticipating an uninspiring variation of the common assumption that being a good person was (and would always be) tantamount to being a smart person. “Smart,” the girl chose, “because if you’re smart you can choose to be good, but if you’re good you can’t choose to be smart.” The unexpected decision mirrored my own perception of intelligence – a tool to be used to further the good, cultivating the ability to find and consequently do “the right thing.”

This concept was evident in my reality. In my liberal upbringing, those who supported racial, gender, or socioeconomic inequality were easily branded as “ignorant.” Their views and beliefs were attributed to a “lack of experience” or values from a past, “primitive” era. My mother proudly wore a pin proclaiming “I think therefore I am...a Democrat.” With this precept, finding my path in life became easy: I was smart so I pursued a career in doing the right thing—a career in human rights.

However, when I began pursuing human rights academically, my conviction about the logical connection between intelligence and goodness was steadily challenged. My belief in the premise that smart people naturally do the right thing was slowly chipped away. Upon the first several hours of entering campus, my roommate asked, “So your major is human rights? What do you do? Just say, ‘Um, I believe humans should have rights.’” *Chip*. In a moral philosophy class sophomore year, the star student challenged the ethical premise of human rights with the question, “But why is it wrong that we bombed Hiroshima when technically it shortened the war and saved millions of lives?” *Chip*.

The final blow was delivered in a Syrian refugee camp near the Jordanian border during my semester abroad. As I watched fourth grade students draw memories of their homes behind barbed wire fences and machine-gun-armed guards, a UNICEF representative proudly detailed how world leaders, non-profits, and NGOs had orchestrated this “solution.” To realize that the

smartest people around the world—equipped with millions of dollars in resources, driven by a goal to “do the right thing”—could lead to 9 year olds coloring behind barbed wire shattered my belief in the infallible power of intelligence.

When I returned from my time abroad, I took a break from human rights; justifying this retreat as an attempt to not compound the problems that I could not face, let alone fix.

I took a job in technology and channeled my research, writing, and logical reasoning skills—previously cultivated for a career of “doing the right thing”—into different problems, with concrete answers. Yet, as I worked, I slowly became haunted by my abandonment of human rights. From news clips showcasing families ripped apart at the border to offhand comments by coworkers about the #MeToo movement, I found that the hopelessness I had felt in the refugee camp was not turning into the apathy I had expected. Instead, it festered into a resentment that was now directed as much internally as it had been externally.

When I finally gathered the gumption to reexamine my break from human rights, I found that my disillusionment had not been with the power of logic or intelligence. When seeing children juxtaposed against barbed wired fences, logic told me this was a better backdrop than a war-torn state. But my morals raged that when “better” mingled barbed wire and children, better is not good enough.

Throughout most of my life, I saw doing the right thing as an imperative, stemming from my intelligence. I believed that using logic as a segue to goodness would shield me from the biases and moral inconsistencies that often stem from blind faith in espoused dogma. But today I see that my morals are and have always been my underlying guide. Cultivated and scrutinized under the logic I used to value preeminently, my morals have given me the ability to identify what is right and the wisdom to circumvent righteousness. It is with this renewed understanding of my morals and myself that I undertake the next step in pursuing a career in human rights law.

Personal Statement

In immigrant families, our histories are sewn together by stories. Our past can stretch across countries and continents, leading us to the places we now call home. In order to fully understand the scope of our struggles and the significance of our successes, we rely on each other to keep our experiences alive from generation to generation. Without this oral tradition, our histories become frayed at the edges.

My childhood was filled with stories about those who came before me. For the past century, my family has been crossing borders. I listened to my grandparents speak about their lives in Greece before leaving after the war. My parents and sisters would often reminisce about their shared home of Mexico City and how difficult it was for them to adjust to life in suburban Minnesota upon moving there two years before I was born. With many miles separating us from our closest relatives, these stories are how I discovered where and who I come from. They grounded me.

When stories play a such critical role in defining something as foundational as your family, they become a lens through which you come to know the world. I grew up seeking out stories as a way to learn about experiences vastly different from my own. As a kid, this hunger manifested itself in the books I devoured day after day. The more I read and the more I listened, I began to realize just how essential it was to be curious about what was foreign to me and to welcome what I did not understand. Consequently, the values of tolerance and empathy were woven into my worldview.

I decided to pursue social justice advocacy precisely because of these beliefs. My sensitivity to stories makes me acutely aware of who is being heard and who is being ignored, and I aspire to use my own voice and influence to amplify the voices of others. Surely if stories shaped my own sense of self, I can use them to shape the world, too.

Personal Statement

Working as an advocate for survivors of domestic violence for the past year and a half has proven me right. Every day, my clients grant me the invaluable privilege of their most personal truths, often the most harrowing moments of their lives. With each intake I conduct and each petition I draft, I hear the intimate details of domestic violence that my client has endured, her tales of fleeing to shelter, and her anxieties about her immigration status. My responsibility goes beyond knowing the legal remedies available to her; above all, it is my job to listen to her and to bring her story to the forefront of institutions that have time and time again cast her aside.

At its core, I see the job of a public interest attorney to be just this. Uplifting the stories of those who go unheard will be the driving force of my legal practice. I have long been particularly interested in the stories of women and how our plights are so easily deemed insignificant. I plan to listen to women's struggles in obtaining an abortion, their awful tales of sexual assault, and the eerily consistent accounts of harassment, and from them, create change. By championing such narratives and proving without a shadow of doubt that our legal system needs to hear them, I truly believe that reform is not only possible, but imminent.

The stories of those in my family who have moved across oceans and countries to bring me to where I am today are threaded through me. Because of their sacrifice and strength, not only have I received the remarkable privilege of a transformative education and the opportunity to pursue my passions, but I have also gained the values that I hold closest to my heart and have been inspired to dedicate my life to social justice advocacy and the fight for progressive policies. As an attorney, I want my clients to be just as empowered by their own histories as I am, and from that, realize their capacity to influence their world. I will work alongside my clients to ensure that, through litigation and policy change, their stories become so deeply embedded into the fabric of our legal system that there will be not a loose string to pull.

Tíos, abuelos, primos y papa – I sought to fill their absences by making friends on the playground, but I only received puzzled faces from classmates who could not understand my accent. I failed to comprehend their affinity for peanut butter *and* jelly sandwiches, much less grasp their love for a “Philadelphia Eagle.” I felt quarantined through language and culture, all while beginning to lose the connection to my heritage and my native tongue. I was a kid at recess, yet I felt utterly alone.

My earliest memories revolve around walks in the streets of Bello, Colombia to my *abuelo*’s butchery and eating *natilla*, a Colombian Christmastime dessert, with my extended family. I remember handling my dad’s racing pigeons at his coop and playing with my pet tortoise, *Tola*, in my *abuela*’s garden. I also remember the bricks that shattered the windows in my family’s home, my mom clenching my hand whenever a group of men walked past us, and the phone calls that gave me nightmares. My dad, a journalist in Medellín, wrote articles defending the rule of law, lambasting corrupt politicians and advocating for the end of narco-trafficking and civil war. His articles earned him notoriety in violent circles, which eventually spilled over to the lives of his loved ones. As he kept writing, we received threats with increasing frequency, until my mom decided a safe life in Colombia was untenable for her child and applied for asylum to the United States.

Like any adventure for a young boy, my first months in the States proved dreamlike. I saw trees perform nothing short of magic in their transformation from green to crimson. I experienced the sheer joy of my first snow, and I even traded *natilla* for a thirty-pound bird on a strange holiday in November. Most importantly, my mom and I no longer received calls from the men who threatened to harm us. However, after bliss, came reality. Besides my mom and an estranged aunt, my family was home in Colombia. Depressed from being unable to make friends or assimilate, I began seeing a counselor at the age of seven; and thanks to a passionate advocate, I started to feel like a child again.

Jennifer Clerici, the program supervisor for Allentown’s Catholic Charities Immigration Division, tirelessly led my mother and me through the labyrinth of federal immigration law, while at the same time helping a traumatized child transition into a new world. She introduced me to the Boy Scouts of America, taught me the rules of American football (accidentally condemning me to an unlucky life as a

Philadelphia sports fan), and facilitated the acquisition of my first library card. Through these institutions and cultural experiences, my confidence grew, and I began energetically engaging with my peers and classwork. I discovered a passion for literature and surprised teachers with my ravenous appetite for learning (albeit not as ravenous as my appetite for *natilla*). Throughout this time, Jennifer would check in as both advocate and friend, making sure that my mother and I could grasp a piece of the American Dream. Although we never lived behind a white-picket fence – we happily settled for single-bedroom apartments with spluttering heaters – I did achieve the impossible: admission to college.

Attending Lehigh allowed me to help others in similar situations as I pursued opportunities to advocate for immigrants in Allentown and even Germany. While these experiences influenced me in profound ways, the Trump administration's initial travel ban marked a transformative episode in my life. As the president of Lehigh's Global Citizenship student committee, I fostered friendships with graduate international students, some of whom hailed from the countries under the President's ban. Unsure whether their fiancés would be able to come to Pennsylvania and fearful about the possibility of deportation, they openly discussed with me a deep-rooted sense of isolation, an isolation akin to the one I felt growing up on the playgrounds of Allentown. This isolation, however, was neither cultural nor based on an unfamiliarity with language. This isolation was institutional, imposed by powerful people through a narrative of fear, and I felt a responsibility to tell my story as a refugee to repudiate that fear.

During a rally held on February 1, 2017, I spoke to my campus about my experiences as an immigrant and about the impact of advocates and friends. Standing beside the flagpole that marked the heart of Lehigh's campus, 200 students, staff, and professors listened to my story. No longer spoken with a thick accent or met with puzzled faces, my voice urged them to stand beside immigrants, renounce xenophobia, and, most importantly, offer the gift of friendship. Although I had long been interested in pursuing a career in law, this experience, intertwining my upbringing with tangible advocacy, proved to be the catalyst that compels me to act now. Every child deserves to eat their respective *natilla* without fear of repudiation, harm, or violence. I will be forever grateful for the opportunity to be the advocate for those children that Jennifer was for me.

Personal Statement

The air is caustic and dense. I sit in a sterile examination room in Nagorno-Karabakh, the war-torn region between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As I fasten the camera to the tripod, I wonder if the six-hour journey to interview Dr. Khatcho, a Syrian refugee who fled here, was worth the risk. A faint roar grows louder. I fidget in my chair. Outside, I see military vehicles penetrating a film of dust on the otherwise desolate path. As I wait for Dr. Khatcho, a victim of ISIS, I remind myself why I am here.

Three years ago I saw history repeating itself. At that point, more than half of the Armenian population in Syria had been displaced. Since experiences of Syrian minority populations often go unreported, their narratives were in danger of being lost to history, again. As a descendant of Armenian genocide survivors, I know well the repercussions of not being heard. From family members, I learned the fate of my ancestors. Some survived Ottoman persecution by hiding in caves. Others made up a small fraction of the thousands who turned the Euphrates River red. With every story I memorized, I learned about the overwhelming pain of being denied one's truth, as the Genocide, even 100 years later, remains officially unrecognized. It became clear to me that acknowledgement and accountability are integral parts of the quest for justice. So, at age 12, I began sharing my family's stories. At 17, I wrote a play about the genocide. It all seemed so simple, until I was confronted by the power of denial.

When a student complained to our principal that the events of 1915 were not genocide, our high school cancelled the production of my play. This strengthened my resolve to tell the stories of the silenced, yet it also introduced me to the limitations of storytelling as a means to achieve justice. The efficacy of a story is dependent on who is speaking, who is listening, and how strong the counter-narratives are. As I continued my human rights work, these limitations grew more apparent. No matter how many victims I interviewed, whether it was for a play written by trafficking survivors who asked me to help tell their stories, or an article I wrote quelling myths on refugees for Human Rights Watch, these narratives were just some among many. They could easily be drowned out. Through contributing to successful prosecutions of crimes against humanity in El Salvador and Argentina, I began to recognize the critical role of formal justice as a medium for reconciling heard and unheard stories. It provided an opportunity to rectify the unequal weight afforded to what had become the dominant narrative.

Personal Statement

Acknowledging this, I created Rerooted, the largest archive of marginalized, minority, Syrian refugee testimonies. Today, while I seek to bring voice to unheard stories, I am also working with the UN and transitional justice groups to ensure this documentation is someday used for accountability, supporting access to justice for victims of Syria's now eight-year-long conflict. Dr. Khatcho is one of those victims.

As we sit in the examination room, Dr. Khatcho tells me about his upbringing in Syria, his three daughters, his work as a neurologist, the lives he saved, and how *his* was almost taken. He grows solemn as he shares how he managed to escape beheading by ISIS, twice. He laments, "*My heart has turned to stone.*" I ask him what justice might look like in Syria. His answer is simple: the truth should be known.

A few years ago I might have celebrated that answer, reconfirming to myself that I was doing what I set out to do—acknowledge the truth and reality of these atrocities. However, this time, being confronted so directly by the complexities of the truth, I felt my methods were insufficient to achieve this goal. When I began my human rights work, I saw the potential of the law to combat denial. The past two years have further crystallized for me the importance of the law, this time for its ability to reconcile more nuanced conflicting realities. Interviewing more than 100 Syrian refugees has made me more attuned to the challenge of triangulating the validity of multiple narratives. Throughout my interviews, I found that truth for some is that the Free Syrian Army is saving the country. For others, like Dr. Khatcho, President Assad's government deserves unfettered support for protecting its minority populations. As I continue to see the complexities of truth within these testimonies, I grow even more convinced of the value of formal justice as a means to establish an authoritative, inclusive process for ensuring accountability.

As I unscrew the camera from the tripod, I gently look up to see Dr. Khatcho for what will most likely be the last time. Having told his story, his blue eyes seem to glimmer with new hope. He believes there will be justice. And so do I. Yet, as I drive away from the contested border, I am reminded of the people on the other side. They too believe they deserve the chance to claim they are on the side of justice. And so do I. I wonder whether law can reconcile these contradictions in ways that avoid denying any side of the complex truth. A legal education will prepare me to seek answers to that pressing question and allow me to more effectively continue the work I have started.