

“That’s a Civil Matter”  
by MinJae Kim

To a cop, “that’s a civil matter” is a versatile phrase. It is a wonderfully effective conversation ender. *For example*: after spending the better part of a shift responding to a series of emotionally draining calls, a cop is assigned to a (comparatively asinine) dispute between neighbors about a tree branch overhanging a property line. “That’s a civil matter” are magic words that allow the cop to leave. However, the phrase isn’t always so sweet. When a domestic violence victim is struggling to understand court orders, saying “that’s a civil matter” is a thinly veiled attempt to avoid the embarrassment of saying, “I can’t help you because I don’t know how it works.”

BYU Law’s partnership with the Timpanogos Legal Center (“TLC”) is helping me to stop hiding behind the shield of “that’s a civil matter” as I so often did when I worked as a deputy sheriff in California. Despite being a first-year law student with all of two months of legal instruction under my belt, I am able to immediately start giving back to my community by volunteering at TLC’s legal clinic. Once a week, I partner with skilled attorneys who offer pro bono legal advice on a wide range of topics. I am once again in the front row of the theater of people’s lives, but this time I’m not an overstretched law enforcement officer being asked to hastily apply a Band Aid to someone’s life and move onto the next call. I’m a law student acquiring the foundational knowledge I will someday use to connect people with sustainable solutions for their troubles, and I am hungry for that knowledge. I want to learn how child custody, alimony, and child support are determined. I want to learn how property is equitably divided in a divorce. I am as eager today to learn how to practice the law as I was four years ago to learn how to enforce it.

It’s reassuring that I’m not the only cop thinking along these lines. When I participated for the first time in TLC’s clinic, I was partnered with a 3L who was an experienced clinic volunteer. This 3L was a soft-spoken and unassuming middle-aged man. I was stunned to hear such a gentle person discussing in detail the cycle of violence, i.e., the tension-building, crisis, and honeymoon phases. I recalled my frustration when, as a cop, I unsuccessfully tried many times to explain this concept to domestic violence victims. How did this man know so much about such an (unfortunately) obscure topic? It all became clear when as we wrapped up for the night, the 3L told me he was a retired deputy sheriff. *Cool!*

As I admired the sincerity with which this 3L interacted with clients, I fondly recalled the great men and women I worked alongside in California. It occurred to me: a police academy class and a first-year law cohort share many similarities. Each involves a group of people who have been selected to fill a limited number of seats. Each group includes people whose views are colored by different backgrounds and life experiences, and the resulting diversity of thought contributes to the richness of discussions and learning. A police academy discussion on the allure of gang life seemed rather sterile until a fellow recruit spoke up about how he broke his family’s multigenerational cycle of crime, and a property class discussion on landlord-tenant laws was deadly boring—sorry, Professor Fee—until I heard the passionate grievances of various classmates who had been wronged by their landlords.

It is these types of experiences—participating in TLC’s clinic, hearing from the varied life experiences of classmates—that make law school feel so *real*. Each day, I learn from classmates

and professors who have been there and done that. Once a week, the TLC allows me to listen to and work through *civil matters* that were outside my purview when I was a deputy sheriff.

BYU Law is a truly diverse community drawing students from all walks of life, who are united by the desire to “go forth to serve.” I am reminded of the prophet Isaiah’s words: “[L]et us go up to the mountain of the Lord ... [and] walk in his paths. ... [We] shall beat our swords into plowshares, and [our] spears into pruninghooks.” (Isaiah 2:4)

I am grateful for the experiential learning opportunity I enjoy through BYU Law’s partnership with Timpanogos Legal Center, and I hope that like Isaiah’s plowshares-ex-swords, I will successfully retool my past experiences as a law enforcement officer to become an effective advocate who can help ease others’ burdens.

Word Count: 767