

## WELLMAN HILL SUMMER 2015 REFLECTION

During the summer of 2015, I had the incredible opportunity to complete a legal externship at the Federal Public Defender's Office, in Cleveland. Admittedly, I was at first wary of my new employment. Before the summer, my legal experience occurred only at the county level, my internships having been with the Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court and the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's Office. My largest attack of doubt, however, concerned the common stereotype that public defenders are synonymous with overburdened dockets and, as a result, ineffective counsel. Yet, I would quickly discover that, while the former stereotype may be true, the latter could not be more false.

On my first visit, for the interview, I noticed that the Cleveland FPD office, perched away in the Skylight Office Tower, on West 2<sup>nd</sup>, was arranged according to an unremarkable corporate aesthetic (brushed-metal cubicles, nine-to-five gray paint job...), with the slight exception of the artwork hung along the office's perimeter. The quality, style, and subject of the art were varied—semi-abstract painting of a weeping angel here, El Greco-inspired chalk drawing of a motorcycle there—but each shared an unconventional attribute: they were all “on loan,” as my boss later told me, from past clients.

Many of the FPD's clients, therefore, were so pleased with their “ineffective counsel” (as the stereotype goes) that they donated their work to their former lawyers, now friends. The defenders are thus constantly enveloped, in both a figurative and literal sense, by past defendants, whose expressions of artistic creativity symbolize, in the office, renewed hope and gratitude. Perhaps most striking, the majority of this artwork came from clients who did not prevail in the courtroom, and who now spend their lives behind bars. But this is the grim reality that public defenders cannot clock out of when they leave the office at the end of the day: many of their clients will lose, be locked up, and then promptly forgotten by a society that wishes to have never been bothered by them in the first place.

Too many clients, of course, had lost from the beginning in the face of poverty, bad homes, poor luck, or other privations. Yet nearly all of the current and past defendants with whom I spoke mentioned having two lucky breaks in their lives—their initial representation by the FPD and their ongoing friendships with the defenders, the few people who do not, and cannot, forget them. Some, in fact, call their defenders weekly, either for updates on appeals, sports scores, or just to hear the voice of someone they trust. My work with one of them, whom I'll call “George,” concretely illustrates the fruits of the Wellman Hill Grant's mission to promote public service, and therefore deserves mention.

On my first day of work, after the interview, I received a CD that contained digital banker's box upon banker's box of financial information and FBI-investigation transcripts (known as "302s"). My boss, the great attorney Jeff Lazarus, asked me to research relevant IRS code and analyze these records for potential tax crimes, since George was accused of tax evasion. Over the course of two months, I transformed these materials into legal briefs and a presentation that we eventually gave to the prosecution.

Before the presentation, however, I was fortunate enough to meet George face-to-face several times. He told me that he had spent nearly all of his money on his previous lawyer, who represented him poorly but gladly took the last of his savings. I saw in his eyes the fear of the imminent legal proceedings, and heard in his voice the frustration at being taken advantage of by federal agents and his last counsel. After meeting George, the research materials were no longer mere tax records or judicial opinions, but instead became small pieces of the golden key that would rightfully liberate this man.

I am very happy to report that, after our presentation, the U.S. Attorney's Office agreed that no crime had been committed. George was to continue his life as a free man, proving a rare, but satisfying, exception to the general rule of life at the FPD. I wondered in the days that followed whether George would one day contribute a piece to the office's gallery. To my knowledge, he has not yet done so. But the gravity of that décor continues to weigh on me, and, in truth, no work in my legal career has been as gratifying or meaningful to date. The incredibly talented public defenders with whom I had the pleasure of working should serve as reminders to all that compassion and selflessness—two of Wellman Hill's most-treasured virtues—prevail at the intersection of law and public service, and should continue to do so for all time.

Last, but most important, I would like to thank Elizabeth Hill for her unending generosity in making my experience possible and for setting an example that all students and practitioners of political science should follow. I would not presume to speak for Ms. Hill, but I strongly believe that the guiding truth of her grant is that a republic cannot exist without the virtue of its citizens, and no virtue so enriches or so unifies than that of serving the people for whom our republic stands.