

THE LEGAL AID SOCIETY OF  
SAN MATEO COUNTY  
**PRO BONO PUBLICO**



When I joined Legal Aid SMC in February of this year, I could never have imagined the adversity that our clients, our volunteers and our country would be facing. Despite dealing with the stress of a pandemic yourselves, you all have show such great generosity to Legal Aid SMC and our clients. It is wonderful to be part of a community that comes together to support our most vulnerable in unprecedented times.

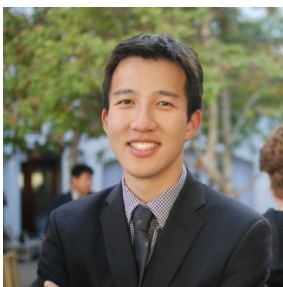
In this issue of Pro Bono Publico, we are highlighting the work of four of our fantastic volunteers, but we are celebrating the work you have all done throughout this past year. Your work has kept domestic violence survivors safe, kept children in stable and secure homes, and has allowed our clients to continue to provide care for their developmentally disabled family members.

I would also like to thank you all for the warm welcome you have shown me. It is a pleasure and a privilege to work with you. I wish all a wonderful National Pro Bono Week!

Sincerely,

Stephanie Bilinski  
***Pro Bono Director***  
***Legal Aid Society of San Mateo County***

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Last fall Nathan Cao, in-house counsel for Box, Inc., volunteered to represent a young woman in her request for a Domestic Violence Restraining Order. This was a relatively straightforward legal matter that became more and more complicated as the case went on. It is also a great example of how difficult it can be to obtain a restraining order without the support of an attorney.

The client, “Ariella” \*, was a young woman, originally from China, who had been in a short but abusive relationship with “Thomas”. He had alcohol issues and hit her after long nights of drinking. He told Ariella that he had a gun and would kill her if she ever left him. Despite her fears, Ariella knew she needed to get out of the

relationship, and she took the brave move of ending things. Thomas was not willing to let Ariella go easily. He harassed her via text and phone. He came to Ariella's home in the middle of the night, drunk and yelling. He called her work and asked for her office address because he had a "special delivery". His harassment extended to her friends. Because Ariella is an immigrant from China, Thomas threatened to report her and her friends for being "hackers" and working for the Chinese Communist Party, telling Ariella the FBI would be coming for her.

Ariella first obtained her temporary restraining order with the assistance of our partner agency, Bay Area Legal Aid. BALA then referred her to Legal Aid SMC and then Nathan jumped in to represent the client at her hearing.

Thomas continued his abuse through the legal process. The matter was continued several times, which wore heavily on Ariella. The judge then decided to appoint counsel to represent Thomas, reasoning that the allegations, if proven, were criminal acts. This was something that no one had ever heard of a judge doing, especially since there were no criminal charges pending or even contemplated. Nathan argued that appointing counsel was not appropriate because Thomas faced no criminal penalties, but the judge ruled against him. This all fed into Thomas's bad behavior throughout the case. He gloated openly in court any time a ruling went against Ariella, harassed Nathan via text and lied to the court about communications between him and Nathan.

The matter was then continued due to COVID-19 before it was finally heard by the court this summer. After 2 days of trial, the court issued its ruling and granted the client a permanent restraining order.

Nathan says that this was a great experience specifically because he was able to learn how to really advocate for Ariella as an individual and to get to know her. Since this matter took a while to come to hearing, the client stayed under constant stress and tension and had to continually relive the abuse suffered. As Nathan and Ariella went over her testimony, it became clear that she was just reading and not really telling the judge her story. It is very common for domestic violence survivors to dissociate from the trauma they have experienced to protect themselves. Nathan was able to gain Ariella's trust. He worked with her on breaking through that self-protective barrier to communicate to the court what she went through. "It was so rewarding to work with an individual client," says Nathan, "because you see the impact of the work. You really want to win for the client's sake."

Nathan wants to thank the staff at CORA and the Family Violence Appellate Project for their assistance and support on this case. He says that in a matter like this where anything can happen, having the mentorship was valuable. We thank Nathan for a year of hard work, and for being such a fantastic advocate and ally to the client.

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Assad Rajani and Tom Carmack of Arnold & Porter, Kaye, Scholer LLP successfully assisted a mother, "Bella" to become the limited conservator of her developmentally disabled 18-year old son, "Steven" who has autism and suffers from a seizure disorder and anxiety. In consultation with the Legal Aid SMC, Arnold & Porter coordinated with the Probate Investigator, the appointed attorney for the conservatee, the Golden Gate Regional Center, social workers, and treating physicians to prepare the petitions, represent their client and successfully obtain a limited conservatorship. By obtaining a limited conservatorship, Bella is able to help her son make decisions about his medical treatment, education, and living environment, while still allowing Steven to live as independently as possible.



Assad and Tom have become consistent and generous volunteers with Legal Aid SMC and are always willing to make time in their very busy schedules to help families in need. "This was an especially rewarding experience," said Assad Rajani. "In California, obtaining a limited conservatorship is especially daunting for low-income residents because both the conservator and conservatee must be represented by counsel. That process was made even more challenging this

time due to the pandemic. It was even more critical that our client provide her son the appropriate medical, educational, social and emotional support he deserves.”

We thank Assad and Tom and their whole team at Arnold & Porter for being such great supporters of Legal Aid SMC and our clients!



Recently Josephine Kim of Wilson, Sonsini, Goodrich & Rosati, PC, won a Domestic Violence Restraining Order for LASSMC client, “Mary”. The permanent restraining order secures personal conduct and stay-away orders, protecting Mary and her children for the next three years. If the order is violated, the restrained party may be sent to jail for up to one year and/or pay a fine.

The domestic violence began six months into her relationship with “James”. Mary remembers the verbal and emotional abuse quickly escalating, turning into a cycle of abuse and cries for forgiveness. James, an alcoholic, refused to move from her home. Mary would spend countless nights sleeping in her car or at a friend's home to escape. It was only when a judge issued a move-out order did James begin to take Mary seriously.

Mary initially requested a domestic violence restraining order some time ago but dropped the case shortly thereafter. She stated that it felt like a lost cause, which is a common reaction in those looking to escape a violent relationship. When James threatened to have Mary gang raped in front her children, she became determined to end the abuse.

Josephine worked with Mary for nine months to prepare for her hearing. Now that she has legal protections in place, Mary has found closure and looks forward to a new, joyful chapter of her life.

We thank Josephine and her team at Wilson, Sonsini, Goodrich & Rosati for helping another San Mateo resident obtain peace and safety!

Remember you have something unique to offer those seeking equal access to justice. On behalf of the thousands in need of legal services, thank you. To help determine the most appropriate opportunity, please submit a completed **[Pro Bono Interest Form Application](#)** with a copy of your resume to: Stephanie Bilinski, Director of Pro Bono at **[sbilinski@legalaidsmc.org](mailto:sbilinski@legalaidsmc.org)**.

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