



Christopher McKee: On Working as a Public Defender

[by Teresa Talerico]

For Washington, DC, public defender Christopher McKee, it's not uncommon to play social worker as part of his job.

A supervisor in the Serious Felony Section of the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia and a former public defender in DeKalb County, GA, Mr. McKee often helps find housing, education, and other social services for clients who are acquitted or released. For example, there was the woman who suffered from bipolar disorder, had bounced in and out of the criminal justice system on various drug-related charges, and later became pregnant. Mr. McKee eventually found her a home at a center for mentally ill women who are pregnant.

"They really stabilized her life," he says. "Now she has a job and she's taking care of her baby and she hasn't been in trouble in the last two years. Those things are rewarding."

Q: What attracted you to this kind of work?

A: I got a master's degree in theological studies and my law degree at Emory University. So I went in with a public interest, service-oriented vocation track. The first internship I did was with a nonprofit criminal defense group called the Georgia Justice Project. Once I worked for them, it seemed to be where I fit the best.

Q: What advice do you have for aspiring public defenders?

A: The first way to get a good foot in is to do an internship. Most law schools will have an internship in the area of criminal defense, if not with the public defender's office, than with some other nonprofit or government

agency. That's how you begin to build your resume in the area. You get the contacts that way, and you also get exposure to the kinds of work you would be doing. Summer clerkships or internships are probably the second best way to do it. Most law schools will have some sort of organized summer grant program for people who work in public interest. The third (option) would be to see, if you're a graduate, if you can get an interview with a public defender's office or see if they have an appointed counsel system that handles all the cases that public defenders don't. You can get on a list and pick up cases by court appointment.

Q: Do you recommend joining any organizations?

A: The National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers is a good one. They have a student membership fee. Any of your local jurisdictions will have a criminal defense bar, so students or graduates should become active with that. Your local bar organization usually will have a section for criminal law. It's actually underutilized by students. It's really an opportunity to be involved with other members of the bar who are devoted to criminal defense.

Q: What is a typical day like for you?

A: I personally do serious felonies, which fall into either homicide cases or serious sexual-assault cases. I've done that for the last two years. Those are cases that have usually complicated forensic issues and that's probably a little bit of what I enjoy the most right

now: DNA evidence, forensic evidence like fingerprints, and crime scene analysis. After being in the area for eight years, that's where I find my strengths.

Q: What should aspiring public defenders be prepared for that they might not expect?

A: The entry-level positions will vary a little by office. When I was in Georgia, the entry-level position was a difficult job because you had to...handle high-volume caseloads with a wide variety of different charges.

In the office here in D.C., we have a training program for the first eight weeks with new attorneys. Then you go into juvenile court and begin with bench trials, helping orient you to the social problems your clients face, as well as the criminal case that they have. You do a lot of work, maybe in coordination with social workers or different agencies, in trying to get your client back on track, while also struggling with whatever charges they may be facing. You sometimes wear the hat of social worker, lawyer, guardian.

Q: What kinds of charges would one handle as an entry-level public defender?

A: If you start out in juvenile court, you'll do everything from a simple assault or unauthorized use of a motor vehicle to a murder case.

Q: So it's a baptism by fire?

A: A little bit. Your murder cases...you would have a senior lawyer working with you on it.



And certainly because it's a juvenile case, it's not a conviction; you're adjudicated as either involved or not involved; you can't be held beyond the age of 21, and it doesn't go on your permanent record. But the charges themselves are serious.

Q: You mentioned you sometimes wear the social worker hat. What is that like?

A: When your client comes in with a criminal charge, there usually is a constellation of problems that that individual is facing. They may be truant. They may have family problems, which can go from they don't have proper public housing or they don't have proper money to support the family. In order to stabilize your client, if your client is to be released back into the community, you have to make sure they have the kind of housing that's going to be stable enough that the client doesn't get into trouble again. You may have to help with public benefits. You may have to help if the person hasn't been properly treated within the education system.

We think of it as an opportunity to take an individual who's been charged with a crime to get sort of stabilized in their life.

Q: What should a public defender always remember about his or her clients?

A: That the system in and of itself does not really recognize your client's dignity as a human being. So it's important that you remember that and that you use it as an opportunity to assure them that they're going to be treated fairly, that they're a human being and they deserve to have someone standing next to them and defending them. That's what our entire system's built upon.