

BACK STORY

Recollections of a Legal Observer

By Angela M. Cook, Esq.

While I was growing up, my dad taught me a lot about history. He especially loved to share about the historical figures that he admired most. His heroes became my heroes, because they challenged injustices despite being told that their actions would cause trouble. In other words, their constitutionally guaranteed right to speak out came with a risk. Those risks included verbal attacks, physical injury, wrongful arrest or worse.

When I was a kid, people like Jackie Robinson and Rosa Parks appeared to walk tall on their own. Now, I understand the importance of those working behind the scenes. My heroes were often aided by less-visible supporters: those who ensured the calls for justice kept ringing by bailing them out of jail; tending to their injuries; providing food, water and shelter; offering encouraging words; or just clearing a path. Without those who are willing to combat fundamental barriers, the higher hurdles of change and equality become more difficult to overcome.

Inspired by my father's romanticization of a time when people stood for something, in the summer

of 2020, I began volunteering as a legal observer in the demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd. Legal observers help ensure that the fundamental freedoms to assemble and speak are protected by acting as neutral third parties trained to monitor, record and report unlawful actions by law enforcement toward demonstrators. In this way, legal observers help ensure that the voices of change can be heard. My draw to the less-visible, yet critical, role of legal observer was reinforced when demonstrators told us that they felt reassured by our presence. They found comfort in knowing that we were there to ensure that they could peacefully express themselves.

Initially, I was hesitant to become involved because of reports of injury and mistreatment of demonstrators and legal observers alike. I overcame those feelings and signed up to become a legal observer, because I wanted to help protect the right to free expression. I was amazed to see so many people of diverse backgrounds and ages unite to challenge unjust killings, even as the global health crisis brought its own threats to life and liberty. They marched, rallied, sang, shared poetry and art,

and used the power of expression reverberating in everything from their clothes to their bullhorns to challenge the status quo. Some demonstrators did face jail and injury, but they kept showing up, day after day, and week after week. They refused to be silenced. They helped me understand why my dad's heroes became my heroes. They stood for something.

Throughout my career as an attorney representing children in foster care, I have learned that not speaking up means that other people will make decisions on your

behalf. No one more fully understands the issues that impact your life than you. When other people make decisions about your life without your voice, those decisions are devoid of an understanding of your experience. The outcome can be a result that does not reflect your best interests. Whether in court or on the streets, necessary changes are unlikely to result from silence. Of course, it is also your right to remain silent, but in times like this, your voice is your weapon in the fight for change. If you decide to utilize this opportunity to express yourself, legal observers will be there. Those interested in volunteering as a legal observer can contact the National Lawyers Guild at <https://www.nlgvl.org/>.



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