

Constance Parks, Assistant Public Defender
Augusta Judicial Circuit; Augusta, Georgia
Gideon's Promise Class of 2015

Why indigent defense? Why work for alleged criminals, especially when they cannot afford to pay you a dime? Most public defenders have had this conversation a million times during the course of their career. For me, the conversation did not happen as a child. I did not grow up knowing that I wanted to be in public defense. I went into law school with the dream of becoming an immigration attorney. It was not until my first summer in law school, that I realized that I needed to work for indigent clients.

During the summer, most law students go to large firms or organizations to gain experience. The big bucks—that's what seemed to be on everyone's mind. Every year, I did something different. I worked in the Public Defender's Office. Over those few months, I met some of the most passionate people I had ever met. Not just the attorneys, but the clients. From a traffic citation to a serious felony offense, every person walked in with a problem that needed resolving. Unfortunately, along with these problems, most people had a less than stellar expectation of who would be representing them. How can someone fight for me for free? They are here just to force me to plea. Or my favorite: You're a public pretender. Don't you get \$50 for every person you force to plea? Nine times out of ten, there is a client who comes in to any public defender's office as a last resort. They do it because they need someone. Because they are not paying, they feel like they will be set up for failure. What I loved about the public defender's office from the moment I walked in was watching them change one mind at a time. Today, I tell my clients the same thing that the attorney's at the Public Defender's Office said: I am here for you. I am here to tell your story. I am here to work with you to help you get through the good, the bad, and the ugly. **We are in this together.**

Together. Together is a concept that is put to the ultimate test when you are preparing to go to trial. I recently finished my first felony trial. Child Molestation cases are, arguably, the hardest cases to fight. People have an interest, rightfully so, in protecting children. What makes it even more difficult, is when you fight preconceived notions in a case where you know that the claims are false. I spent months preparing the trial. Thankfully, I had amazing facts on my side. I also had the help of my amazing trial partners and my Gideon's Promise colleges to help get me to day one of the trial. On that day, the Judge and the Prosecutor were doing everything in their power to force my client not to go forward. We were talked down to, ignored, and I was made to feel as if I was setting him up for failure. With every recess, my client said, "I trust in you. We will get through this."

His trial lasted three days. I did not eat. I did not sleep. But I remembered what he said before the State opened their case, "I know how hard you have worked on this. I know that, no matter what, you have my back." And I did. We had a difficult time, but I only needed to show twelve people the truth. Twelve. I still do not remember the moment that the verdict was read. Honestly, it happened so quickly that I don't know whether I actually heard them say Not Guilty. What I remember are the moments after. The moment where my client slouched down and burst into tears. The moment where he reached for me to give me a hug and said, "You just saved my life." The moment where his dad hugged him so tight that I did not know if he would be able to let go. In those few moments, all of the pain, sleeplessness, and stress faded away. In those few moments I realized why we, as public defenders, fight for every client. I realized why we have to continue to arm ourselves in the battle for Liberty and Justice for ALL, not just those with endless financial means.

All of our clients do not have a happy ending, but it is my responsibility to make sure that they know that there is someone in their corner. That someone is looking out for them...protecting them. We are a community for the people. At the end of the day, everybody needs somebody. I started this job because I loved working with the people. I continue this career so that I can help positively change their lives.