

## **Community Legal Aid**

A non-profit law firm serving the legal needs of low-income individuals and families in central northeast Ohio



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## **Team USA: Patriotism means questioning our justice system**

by Maria Duvuvuei, communications and development director

News outlets and social media networks blew up over the weekend with the opening ceremony of the Olympics. The swelling of pride that typically surrounds the international sporting event feels more intense this year, as it comes while we're still in the midst of a global pandemic that continues to claim lives every day.

The vigorous support for Team USA and the ripple effects of devotion to America have me reflecting on the concept of patriotism, juxtaposed against the backdrop of racial justice protests and voting rights activism that's sweeping our nation, and what it means to love and support our country.

I grew up in a small, rural town in central northeast Ohio. Our town had one stop light. It took at least 15 minutes to get anywhere -- grocery store, post office, school, work. Most of our interaction was within our own family.

Growing up, my hometown was almost exclusively white. There was exactly one Black family at my high school. Even today, the town's demographics sit at 97% white. Foreign-born, Asian, Black, and multi-ethnic people cumulatively account for less than 3% of the population.

It was also fairly economically affluent, with a poverty rate, a cost-of-living index, and an unemployment rate that all sit below the state averages.

All of this led to one simple truth: my formative years were shaped overwhelmingly by people who looked, behaved, and thought the same. My sense of patriotism was defined with equal weight as supporting our troops and supporting our elected officials. God and country were synonymous, and it was just generally accepted that everyone had equal rights, equal opportunity, and equal treatment under our nation's set of laws. Up until I went to college, I'd never experienced or witnessed anything that would contradict these notions.

Today, we have a word to describe this worldview: privilege. But at the time, we called it something different: national pride.

This sense of patriotism was also shaped largely by the fact that I (and the rest of my town) actually knew very little about historical justice in the United States. I knew from my history class that it took two years after the Emancipation Proclamation for slavery to officially end, but I never heard the word Juneteenth. The picture painted for me was the "white knight" Union army bringing salvation and freedom to the still enslaved Blacks in the Deep South. Jim Crow laws were framed for me as a set of rogue lawmakers trying to keep the Black man down, and failing against a powerful government system firmly rooted in freedom, equality, and justice for all. Any racist laws were painted for me as an accidental footnote in our nation's history, rather than the purposeful structures they were intended to be.

It wasn't until recently, when I joined the team at Community Legal Aid, that I even heard terms like redlining, or that I learned that the "right" to an attorney isn't absolute and that legal protections and processes are different depending on what type of case you have. It wasn't until I started reading books like *The Color of Law* that I was shocked to learn that our government (as recently as the 1950's) had written, official laws that even mentioned the color of citizens' skin. And it wasn't until meeting colleagues and clients with vastly different life experience than me, that I realized just how unequal our systems are and that there is a real, human impact to these injustices.

My whole sense of national pride was challenged, and that was disorienting and uncomfortable. But it's also been the best thing that's ever happened to me.

Our country isn't defined by a group of men who founded it, or by the now-historic documents that they penned. It's defined by the set of ideals that they espoused, even in their imperfect way. These ideals -- equality, freedom, justice -- are flawed, because we as human beings are flawed. But we aspire to them by questioning where they fail and by fighting to improve the places where they are weakest.

This is what Legal Aid does. We seek the places where our nation's ideals are darkest, and we bring them out into the light. We tell our clients that they are seen, that they are heard, that they are valued, and that they have rights. Then we fight so that they can protect and assert them. That fight is transformative.

And that is what true patriotism looks like.

*This article is part of Legal Aid's "Big Ideas" series.*

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