

Profile in Service: Emily Willard



Our Profiles in Service series continues with Emily Willard, an investigator who joined DPD more than 6 years ago right before the COVID-19 pandemic radically reshaped the practice of public defense. She came to DPD after completing a PhD in International Studies with a focus on human rights abuses in Latin America. Emily has helped defend clients in all of DPD's practice areas: Involuntary Treatment Act court, family defense, misdemeanors, felonies, and BECCA cases.

Now, Emily is leveraging her academic training and breadth of experience in public defense as a Practice Area Training Coordinator. This year-long special duty assignment will allow Emily to develop a comprehensive training curriculum for DPD's investigators tailored to the challenges her colleagues face in the field.

This Q&A has been edited for clarity and length.

What drew you into public defense?

All of my academic work has been in international studies, looking at human rights and US foreign policy in Latin America. In my dissertation work, I spent five summers living with a small indigenous Maya Mam community, Nuevo Amanecer, learning about their conception of what justice means to them following the genocide they fled in the 1980's. I wanted to understand women's experience of this conflict, and the role of the United States played in perpetrating the genocide in the 1980s. I wanted to speak with women. In the transitional justice world, women's experiences of violence are often narrowly described as sexual violence. It is certainly true that women experience sexual violence,

and they also experience much more. I wanted to hear these untold stories. I found that the people of this town were generally disconnected from the national and international efforts to hold genocidaires accountable. What these women and their families are focused on is building a better future for their children, and they are thriving in many ways despite continued violence and economic hardship.

That experience taught me how important it is to be involved directly with the communities I work in, but I knew moving to Guatemala following my degree wasn't practical. Instead, I decided to work in my own community helping my own neighbors who also suffer human rights and civil rights violations. I saw public defense as a means of holding the government accountable for those violations, and the opportunity to do what I consider to be activist work as a profession while making a living wage at DPD which I understand is a rare privilege.

How have expectations for people in your role on our defense teams evolved since your first day at DPD?

I started right at the beginning of the pandemic, when cases were not coming in with everything being shut down. That let me focus on two big homicide cases with Molly Gilbert, an experienced investigator who mentored me when I came to DPD. Now, people don't always have that luxury to learn at a slow pace on the job when they come in, which is part of why I was so interested in the Practice Area Training Coordinator assignment. As we go through generational turnover, I felt committed to preserving the institutional knowledge of our old guard investigators and putting some structure into the training we receive.

In terms of the assignments I get when I'm assisting with a case, technology has evolved so much even in the past six years. Cell phone extractions, where the police make a digital copy of an entire phone, have become much more common. Just getting your computer to open the files we get in discovery can be a challenge, and once you have the information, you have to track conversations people are having as they switch between phone calls, texts, and messages on other apps like Instagram or WhatsApp. It's this kind of perfect storm of this increased amount of information, but it's becoming more challenging to access because we don't have the same tools to work with this data that law enforcement does.

How do you manage the stressful nature of working in public defense?

The biggest thing I make sure to do, is have very strict boundaries between work and home life. I put my work phone on "do not disturb" mode at 5pm and really set it aside until the next morning, if possible. Even when I'm hanging out with friends from work on the weekends, it's almost comical, but I won't talk about work stuff and will cut work

conversations short. I even made these conversation cards for weekend trips with some work friends to spur conversation about other things and get to know each other. Asking people about their favorite conspiracy theory or what the funniest thing they'd ever Googled is so much more restorative than talking about work.

What keeps you engaged in this work?

So many of the people we work with have been harmed by oppressive social systems, and while I can't fix what happened in the past to our clients, I can go visit them in the jail and sit with them and simply treat them with dignity as human beings. Sometimes, that leads to a client opening up and sharing some information that leads to crucial information in their case, but even just sitting beside someone and treating them with dignity is important, I think. Especially when the criminal legal system has dehumanized our clients, it's important to work in a client-centered way to fight alongside people who've been mistreated and marginalized, and insisting they're treated with dignity and respect by a system that usually denies them that.

When you reflect on your time at DPD, is there a case where you felt you made a difference or client whose story has stuck with you over the years?

One client, a middle-aged Black man who had experienced a lot of system involvement, has stuck with me as an example of how earning a client's trust is so important. He kept not coming to meetings with his attorney, and finally, after five no-shows, we invited him to come out with us to the scene visit and tell us his story of what happened. We used a County car to meet him where he felt comfortable and provided him with his own copy of the notes about the scene visit I'd put together for myself and the attorney. I think the fact that we approached this in a client-centered way by providing a set of notes and documents for him, explained to him what we were doing, showed him the discovery, and walked him through what we were thinking and really engaging him in a collaborative approach to his case made him feel safe opening up to us, and he saw that we were taking his case seriously.

In that conversation, he gave us some information that then led us to being able to break open the case and get it dismissed. That was one of the cases that I am very proud of the work that I did because I've spent so much time in school and doing research, I felt like I was able to put that experience and skill working alongside him and my coworkers to help him achieve a positive outcome with his case.