

Profile in Service: Helen Redman



DPD's *Profiles in Service* series continues with Helen Redman, supervising attorney for one of the department's family defense units. With the exception of a brief stint handling the felony first appearance calendar, Helen has practiced in family defense for her entire career since starting at The Defender Association (TDA) on St. Patrick's Day in 2008.

Attorneys in family defense represent both parents and children when the state seeks to interfere with family autonomy, such as when a child is removed from their parent's home or the state petitions to terminate someone's parental rights. In contrast to criminal cases, which usually focus on a specific incident in the past, practicing in family defense gives attorneys the opportunity to work with their clients to change the facts that led to their involvement in the family policing system. These cases can take years to resolve, allowing lawyers like Helen the chance to form long-lasting relationships with their clients.

The following Q&A has been edited for clarity and length.

What drew you into public defense?

Before I went to law school, I was a high school teacher in New Orleans and some of my favorite students were getting into trouble. Many of them were in the foster care system or living with relatives due to parental incarceration, and I began to feel like a cog in the school-to-prison pipeline. That awareness got me into prison abolition activism, which led me to pursue a legal career.

I originally thought I would go into juvenile criminal defense, since it's not true everywhere that kids and parents get lawyers for their foster care case. A chance interview with a judge I wanted to clerk with in Seattle resulted in a connection to TDA and I applied to their

dependency court unit. I was initially skeptical of representing parents in those cases, but I quickly gained so much compassion for all the things parents endure when they're ensnared in the foster care system.

My empathy only deepened once I became a parent myself; being a parent is so hard but imagine doing it with no money and no support. Then, at every turn when you try to get help, someone is threatening you with the loss of your children. Once I returned to work after having my first child, I felt reaffirmed that public defense was the right career for me.

What keeps you engaged in this work?

A colleague of mine, Chris Franklin, who has spent a long time in our unit always tells our new attorneys that family defense gives you the highest highs and the lowest lows. In the best-case scenario in our practice, you get to reunify a family. It's such a huge thing. Winning a 72-hour shelter care hearing and getting a kid back home who was wrongfully taken from their family is huge.

But it also feels really great to get to the end of the dependency case that has gone on for years and years because the client has been so resilient and done so much work. One of the things that makes family defense unique is that we can help our clients change the facts of their case.

If my client is struggling with addiction, that's a fact you can help them as they work on changes in their life. Being the person who can listen to them, give them space to tell their story with an audience who cares, and help them get the warm handoff to services that they need – it's incredibly rewarding. The cases take time, and you can't change those facts overnight, but as long as the case is still happening it is never too late.

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

There's the practical things, like listening to my family when they insisted that I shouldn't sleep in my office early in my career simply because I didn't have a laptop and couldn't bring my desktop computer home on the bus. But what's essential in tolerating the lowest lows are the colleagues I work with and the connections with clients. I feel like I have the best coworkers in the world who always find a way to make each other laugh, even when you're in the middle of a tough trial or take a tough loss.

But what I tell our attorneys whenever I can see someone starting to feel jaded about the work is to go spend time with a client. Go to the jail, go to someone's house. There's no better feeling than walking out of the jail. It drives home how much of an honor and privilege it is to be the person who get to walk in there, help somebody, and walk out.

How has the practice of public defense changed since you took on your first case?

Well, 18 years is a substantial amount of time – the babies who were removed from their families the week I started this work are now adults, right? But one of the aspects of this work I find interesting is how much has stayed the same despite how many times the state has rebranded the agency that takes kids away from their parents. Regardless of what they call themselves, the level of oppression and systemic bureaucratic garbage stays the same.

On the other hand, there have been so many logistical changes in how we represent our clients. When I started, the caseload was 80 clients. Now it's 45. That's a big, big difference in the level of support we can provide people who badly need it. There's also been huge technological changes. We've gone from working entirely in paper files where I wrote my notes and my timekeeping, which would require a paralegal to add up my hours by hand so we could get reimbursed from our contracts with the state government. That was so time-consuming it was effectively my paralegal's entire job, which meant I had to do all my own filing. So, if I represented a parent who had five children, I printed five copies of my motion, walked my five copies to the clerk's office, got them stamped, took them down to the judge's mail room, got them stamped, put them in the judge's Working Papers area, and then in all of the proper boxes.

The amount of time that we now spend actually writing our motions, litigating, and researching is exponentially more. DPD also has vastly better resources than when I started and TDA was still a non-profit. That makes a difference in what we can do to help our clients change the facts of their case, but it's also made a huge impact in our systemic advocacy to force the system itself to grapple with the harm that removal inflicts on parents and kids.

The work our former colleague, Tara Urs, accomplished with the Keeping Families Together coalition to change the standard for initial removal to properly focus on an imminent risk of physical harm has been transformative in our practice. We win so many more shelter care hearings to get kids back with their parents at the start of a case, which leads to such incredibly better outcomes for families across the life of their case.

There are so many collateral consequences to losing your kids; loss of housing, loss of monetary benefits, and loss of access to treatment where you can have your kid with you. That initial loss really sets people up for a bunch of other losses, even leading to a concomitant depression, and it makes it very hard to pull out of that hole. If you're grieving the loss of your family, it's so much harder to find the motivation to do all the other things the system asks of our clients before their kids can come home.

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?

I once had a client when I was the Family Treatment Court attorney who was unhoused, living under a bridge. Their case will always stick with me as evidence of how impossible it is to predict who will succeed despite all the barriers the legal system puts in front of them, and why all our clients deserve more supportive services as they navigate this system.

That client had to move to live under a different bridge, because traffic happens at different times on different bridges and the only way they could make their court appointments reliably was to have the traffic wake them up on time. So, they moved. Obviously, that person was successful in Family Treatment Court, but it shouldn't take that level of superhuman effort for a client to reunify their family.