



## Millennials are Making Their Mark on Legal Aid

By Millie Heur, Communications Specialist,<sup>1</sup> Community Legal Aid SoCal

At Community Legal Aid SoCal (CLA SoCal), our HR statistics show Millennials make up 41% of our 144-member staff, which makes it the largest segment



of the program's intergenerational workforce that spans from the Baby Boomers to Gen Z. Of the groupings, Millennials are the first cohort to grow up steeped in the use of digital technology. They entered the job market when the importance of balancing work

and personal life gained validation and mainstream acknowledgement. They were also the ones who were either just beginning or in the middle of building their professional careers when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and immediately flipped and changed how work was conducted and workplaces functioned. Consequently, Millennials bring a new set of expectations of the employer and workplace, including work-life integration and more flexibility in how they work.

I asked three of our Millennial staff — Ahmad Bhatti, Kate Tran, and Marilyn Zupkoff — to share their professional and personal experiences, their vision, and their ideas about work-life balance. These three are a representative sample of Millennial-aged staff, legal and administrative, who work at CLA SoCal — Ahmad Bhatti is a staff attorney who works in the Family Law Unit, Kate Tran is a senior paralegal who works on the hotline in the Intake and Assessment Unit, and Marilyn Zupkoff is part of the program administrative team as the fund development and marketing coordinator.

### 1. Have your ideas about a work-life balance shifted since the pandemic and, if so, how?

**Ahmad:** Definitely! The shift to remote or hybrid schedules has had a significant impact on work-life balance. The concept of a nine to five workday now actually means from 9 am to 5 pm. Before the prevalence of remote work options, I had jobs where my commute was anywhere from 15 minutes to 1.5 hours.

Just the amount of time that working remotely gives you back has been drastic.

It can have its drawbacks though. When your home is also your office, it can be hard going from one to the other. That, plus having all your work apps just a tap away on your phone can make finding the balance of work time and home time even more difficult. It was definitely something I had to work at — whether it was turning off notifications after my day was over or actively telling myself not to check on the email I received after work hours. Sometimes it's hard to just “turn off.”

**Kate:** Yes, I have experienced shifts. I had to learn how to balance my professional and personal life while working at home. I had to exercise discipline every day, telling myself that even though I was in the comfort of my own home, I still needed to work from nine-to-five as if I were at the office. It was difficult at first because I would get halfway through the workday and then become distracted by other things.

However, once I set up a workstation at home, I found that it resulted in no interruptions.

Even though our unit is now completely remote, I still come into the office on occasion to catch up with my coworkers. I crave at least a few social interactions per week.

**Marilyn:** Absolutely. I don't think I'll ever again work for an organization that demands my presence in an office. The obvious reasons being that I sleep better, eat better, save money, and am more productive without a commute, an early wake-up call, and office interruptions. The less obvious and more personal reason for my answer is that I am a military spouse. During my husband's five short years of service, we have relocated twice and will likely relocate again...and again. It means so much to me that my supervisor and executive director have embraced remote work.

### 2. Why did you choose to go into public interest law and what drew you in to work for a legal aid program?

**Ahmad:** Public service has been a goal of mine from the time I started thinking about what I wanted to do after completing my education. Legal practice is something I kind of stumbled upon and found I loved. Before practicing public interest law, I interned and worked at multiple district attorneys' offices. That is where I initially began working on domestic violence (DV) cases. Working to prevent DV and helping survivors quickly became a passion of mine.

While looking for work during the pandemic, I came across an opening with CLA SoCal's Family Law Unit for an attorney position focused on attaining DV Restraining Orders for clients. It piqued my interest because my prior work was focused on indirectly helping survivors by putting away abusers. Now I get to work directly with survivors of DV by assisting them with obtaining their restraining orders and providing them with aid after the fact. The additional aid ranges from assistance with legal matters that often come along with DV cases, such as divorce or child custody and visitation, to referrals to our case management team for help locating resources and finding housing.

**Kate:** I have always been interested in public interest law, and I enjoy assisting others. I come from an immigrant family, and we had trouble accessing the type of assistance that CLA SoCal provides to the community. It was difficult for us to find competent free legal services and our experiences are what prompted me to pursue public interest law.

I am proud of the work I do, and I like seeing people in our community being assisted during the most challenging times of their lives. As a paralegal working in the Intake and Assessment Unit and on the hotline, I have firsthand experience with helping them. They communicate their frustration and plead for our help daily. Even though I cannot help everyone, I am able to assist some of them and that means a lot to me.

**Marilyn:** Truthfully, I didn't know about public interest law until I began my first job out of college. I was a victim advocate at a women's shelter in Wisconsin and worked closely with a few attorneys from Legal Action of Wisconsin to provide legal services to a rural and underserved area of Kenosha County.

Watching a legal aid attorney fiercely represent a domestic violence survivor in court is like watching Batman protect Gotham from the Joker: impressive and inspiring. I saw the difference public interest attorneys made in the lives of low-income people and I knew I wanted to be involved in the cause. Today, I am literally working my dream job raising awareness and funds for legal aid.

### 3. Beyond pay, what employee benefits do you value? How does CLA SoCal support you as an employee?

**Ahmad:** Benefits, such as medical, dental, and vision, are a must. In addition, we have an Employee Assistance Program that can help us manage stress, mental health, and burnout, which is important when almost every day we work with clients who have been through traumatic experiences.

As a young attorney, the plethora of training resources we have available to us has been vital. Last year, I discussed with my supervisor my desire to get better in different areas of my practice, such as cross examination. Together, we looked at available resources, and soon after I had the opportunity to attend a training in Dallas through the National Institute for Trial Advocacy paid for by CLA SoCal.

**Kate:** CLA SoCal provides an excellent work-life balance experience and that balance means a lot to me. Working on the hotline can be difficult at times, so my supervisor will sometimes encourage me to take a few days off to unwind and de-stress. When I take the time off, I return feeling refreshed and eager to take on the next project.

We also get multiple holidays off, which I am grateful for. When I worked for a private firm, we did not get as many days off due to the high volume of cases, which led to staff burnout. With the work-life balance that CLA SoCal offers, I can enjoy my life outside of work. I am able to reconnect with friends, pursue my hobbies, and devote some time to myself and my mental health. Because CLA SoCal promotes maintaining good mental wellness, I am enjoying finding activities to do outside of work that I can look forward to.

**Marilyn:** I cannot overstate how supported I feel, not just as an employee but as a person with feelings and a family. The ability to work remotely is one example, our reproductive loss leave policy is another. We receive generous paid time off, including 16 holidays, vacation, wellness, and personal days. Just recently, CLA SoCal expanded our sick leave policy to cover mental health care, caring for immediate family and pets, and wellness days.

I am a more confident and skillful person because of the opportunities I have been given at CLA SoCal. I have been sent to conferences to present, which has helped me overcome my fear of public speaking. I have learned how to prepare for and lead a meeting because I attend board meetings. I know that if there are skills that I would like to develop, CLA SoCal will support me.

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Lastly, we also have a lot of fun! CLA SoCal hosts a picnic in the park with a taco truck every summer and a holiday party every December. Each department has a budget allocated to planning team retreats. One year, my team went kayaking and had lunch on the beach. We are also outfitted with cute SWAG, like our branded “I love legal aid” t-shirts and CLA SoCal beanies.

#### 4. Tell us about any advantages and/or challenges you experience because of your age.

**Ahmad:** It is rare that my age is a factor in my interaction with opposing counsel. However, there have been occasional instances when they underestimated me or tried to take advantage of my inexperience. Luckily, I have a great team whose advice and experience I can tap for those rare situations.

Where my age has mattered most has been with my interaction with my clients. I have had clients who have seen my age and flat out asked me how long I have been a lawyer and if I can really handle their case. Those are situations where I have had to really take time to build a rapport and establish the trust that is absolutely necessary for this work. On the other hand, I have had many clients who have been of similar age, and it made our interactions more comfortable, and the rapport and trust come more naturally.

**Kate:** Yes, there are challenges. For example, I get a lot of people asking whether I am “too young to be a senior paralegal.” They express their doubts about my competency during our phone conversations and ask to speak directly with an attorney. I have been interested in law since I was a kid and always knew I wanted to work in this profession. Joining the field soon after high school offered me a significant advantage and has led me to attain the position as senior paralegal at a young age. I have worked hard to become well-versed in numerous areas of law and I have worked on a range of cases that have given me the experience to be a senior paralegal. I know what questions to ask, how to deliver advice, and understand the importance of meeting deadlines.

**Marilyn:** Being a younger person in the workforce with lesser experience has made me an ideal candidate for mentorship, and I have been gifted with the best supervisor and mentor. It feels like I won the lottery because our director of fund development has taught, coached, supported, and inspired me every single day since I started working with her. The same can be said

of my other two colleagues on our four-person team. I learn something new every day from our experienced grants and evaluation manager and communications specialist.

#### 5. How does being a “digital native,” part of a generation who grew up with fluency in the use of digital technology, impact your approach to your work?

**Ahmad:** More and more, tech literacy is becoming a necessity rather than an additional skill. In my day-to-day work, it provides a level of interconnectivity and access that is essential. Through applications like Microsoft Teams and Zoom, all my colleagues are a click away whether they are in the Norwalk or the Santa Ana office. It also makes reaching our clients far easier, many of whom would struggle to come to the office every time we need to discuss their case or prepare for a hearing. Use of tech in the courtroom is also becoming widespread. On several occasions, remote appearances have allowed me to juggle multiple hearings in different courthouses, in different cities, on the same day.

**Kate:** To be honest, I am not very technologically savvy. When I first joined CLA SoCal, I had to inquire about how to use the various servers and software functions. I had to submit numerous tickets to IT for support. By constantly asking questions, I was able to learn new tech skills. Now that I have gotten the hang of it, I am a lot more comfortable working remotely. I now know that I can troubleshoot a computer issue on my own and then send a ticket to IT if I cannot figure it out. I am pleased to say that I am now proficient in using our software and servers, and I am able to help clients send files or emails when they are experiencing problems.

**Marilyn:** I turn to Reddit and YouTube for answers to questions; my colleagues turn to me for answers to their tech-related questions. I am not complaining. I feel grateful to be tech literate. It serves me well in my career. For example, I’m a fast typer, like 70 words per minute fast, because I was taught how to type in grade school. This lends itself to completing tasks quicker and having the ability to take detailed notes in meetings.

I would also say that I am a strong problem solver. My brain is wired to “Google it” if I don’t know something. I grew up with the understanding that we have unlimited access to knowledge via the family computer that I and my siblings all fought to take turns using. Of course, at that time, I was not using the computer

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to research and write the next Great American Novel, but instead playing Sims. I did eventually learn how to conduct research online and cite sources, and I use that knowledge today to write grant proposals.

As a “digital native” in the workplace, I have been awarded new opportunities. When CLA SoCal wanted to launch an Instagram account, I was asked to run it. I now play an important role in content creation and account management for all our social media accounts.

- 1 Millie Johanna Heur is the Communications Specialist at Community Legal Aid SoCal (CLA SoCal). Millie has worked in development and communications for legal services programs for over two decades, currently with CLA SoCal and previously with the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles. In 2023, the article “Building a Sense of Mission, Teamwork, and Camaraderie While Working Remotely” that she co-authored with Linda Rothnagel, Retired Director of Advocacy and Training at Prairie State Legal Services was published in the MIE Journal. Millie also volunteers with the Surfrider Foundation’s Long Beach Chapter, assisting with outreach, beach clean ups, and social events.