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The Redefined Hero: Discovering Champions of Social Change

Emily Benfer
Loyola University Chicago, School of Law, ebenfer@luc.edu

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The Redefined Hero: Discovering Champions of Social Change[∞]

Emily A. Benfer, Amaker Speaker
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"RE-COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL CHANGE:
WHERE YOU WERE, WHERE YOU ARE, WHERE YOU ARE GOING"
BRADFORD WOODS, INDIANA

INTRODUCTION

We know that there are heroes among us and you have heard from many of these attorneys this weekend. I am here to bring you the voices of non-lawyers—the voices of the people many of you went to law school to serve, and one day will serve. I am bringing you their voices because the greatest lessons I have gathered and embraced came from them, from the people I sought to serve. These are the people I choose to walk beside. And they are my heroes.

I am going to tell you the stories of seven people who changed my understanding of our interaction with, and contribution to, humanity. Through their stories we will learn about the champions of social justice who completely redefine the term "hero." They are not traditional heroes. Before today they were unsung. But they give meaning to the word "hero" and it is a meaning I hope you will carry with you into your service as a lawyer.

WHERE WE WERE

Through the Looking Glass

One of the themes this weekend is "where we were." By way of explanation, I should tell you a little about where I have been and who I am. When I was young, my parents gave me a copy of "Through the Looking Glass" and "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll. I read these books over and over again, at first perplexed, but then completely fascinated. I was enthralled with the

[∞] Because this speech is about heroes, it is fitting to dedicate it to one of my own: Florence Wagman Roisman. She is a hero in her own right, not only based on her accomplishments in the arena of social justice, but also based upon her unwavering commitment to equality and demonstrated compassion for other human beings. She is the first to stand up against inequality and on behalf of people in need. Her moral compass points in the direction of justice without fail. For that and the example she sets, I am grateful.

idea that a mirror could lead to another reality; that by looking at our own reflection we could not only imagine a different world, we could cross into it. Essentially, things are not necessarily, and do not need to be, as they are. I'm sure you've all heard this dialogue:

> "I can't believe that!" said Alice.
>
> "Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again, draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."
>
> Alice laughed. "There is no use trying," she said. "One can't believe impossible things."
>
> "I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

I took this quote quite literally. Before breakfast, I tried to dream of the impossible. At that age, I dreamt of ponies with daisies growing out of their ears and ice cream that didn't melt.

As an adult, the impossibilities I believe in are quite different. Soon after college, I determined to set off, quite literally, around the world to make the impossible happen. I joined the Peace Corps motivated by first, a naïve belief that the greatest need in the world was in a foreign place—I learned later that this belief could not be further from the truth—and second, a deep drive to both discover, and learn from, diverse cultures and people while contributing as much as I possibly could.

Hero One: Umama

The first country in which I served was Zimbabwe. It is a beautiful country that has been ravaged by war. It is a country filled with fascinating people who are oppressed by violence, disease, politics and abuse of power. In this setting, I discovered the first of our heroes, Umama.

The woman I called Umama, or mother, was my own age. She rose every day long before first light to fill buckets with water and prepare for the day. Before anyone in the household awoke she washed clothes, made what meager meal she could from corn and leaves, and began the planting or harvesting. I once asked her why she worked so hard and why she did so much before even the sun rose. Her response was quite simple: "It is my duty," she said.

The entire time I lived in her home, I never saw Umama rest. I did see her wipe the blood from the face of another woman who had been beaten by her husband. I saw her care for children who were sick. She said that healing others, if she could, was her duty. While many of her duties were sad, painful, and life-risking, she fulfilled other duties in her community. One day, I returned to her home to find a circle of young women surrounding Umama. Umama was teaching them how to craft baskets from banana leaves that the women would later sell in the market.

She said, with a smile, that it was her duty to share what skill she had with others. In the simple act of showing the women how to weave two banana leaves together, Umama provided income to feed the entire village. She embraced the principal that "if I have something to give, I must give it." In this way she was a hero.

Perhaps we should all ask ourselves what banana leaves we carry that would make a difference in our village . . .

Umama taught me another lesson in the middle of the night. When the stars were still high, Umama woke me, told me to get dressed, and made a motion for me to follow her. I almost always did what she told me to do and three in the morning was no time for an exception.

I followed her trail until we arrived at a home on the other side of the village. A person in the home had just died. In the Ndebele tradition, when a person dies, the body cannot be left alone day or night. The soul needs this time to safely travel to the spirit world.

The men of the village take turns guarding the fire that is believed to protect the departing soul by staving off evil. The women take turns singing to the soul. As Umama explained to me, their voices carry off into the night and are thought to be the vehicle in which the soul can safely travel. The villagers take shifts singing and watching the fire. That night, it was our turn.

Umama and I ducked our heads to enter a small mud hut where the body lay. I will never forget how candles lit the small circular room and made the shadows of all the women crowded inside dance on the wall. The women were packed so tightly into the hut that I could not tell which knee belonged to whose leg or what elbow was connected to whose chest. Umama and I fit into whatever crevice we could.

We should probably pause at this time to appreciate the image of that moment—pale, American me, sandwiched in the middle of fifty very dark-skinned women dressed in traditional Ndebele garb, trying to sing in a clicking language. The diversity was so apparent. Yet, despite our differences, our encounter with death and our joining together that night to say goodbye to a soul was part of the universal human experience.

As I contorted my limbs to fit into the room, the woman beside me rested her arm on my knee to share the Ndebele prayer book from which we sang. We sang for hours. At one point, I stopped singing to ask Umama, "Who is the family of the dead?" She said, without a moment's hesitation, "We all are; you as well." Her simple, certain statement astounded me. Umama's second act of heroism was in the way she lived her belief that we are one village, one family, and as such, we have a sacred duty to one another.

Hero Two: Mue

I met our second hero during my Peace Corps service living in a rural village in Thailand named Mae Charim. The village was located in the mountains

bordering Laos. While in Thailand, I learned important cultural rules including: one must never lose face; one must never point one's toe in the direction of another person; and one must never be lonely.

When I first arrived in my village, my housing was provided by the school for which I worked. It was a thatched roof house just off the main dirt road. My second day in the village, I came home to find about 40 children filling my tiny one room abode. Having yet to learn the language, I could not talk to them so I made faces and pantomimed, attempting to discover why they were in my house. They mostly stared blankly at me and whispered to each other. They stayed through the afternoon. They stayed past sunset. And despite the darkness, they stayed. They stayed the night—not exactly sleeping—mostly staring at the foreigner in the room. The next day, I made a comment to a teacher who spoke English about my interesting evening. She said, "Yes, wasn't that kind." In response to my puzzled face, she told me that the villagers, fearful that I would become lonely, had sent their children to me to keep me company.

Among the children that stayed with me that night was Mue, our second hero. I always think of her name as a Muse but without the "s." Mue, a nine-year-old little girl whose smile stretches far beyond her tiny frame, never left my side after that night. She would always greet me with gifts which included a bunch of bananas, hard-shelled bugs (a delicacy), flowers caked in warm dirt from the place where she ripped them up . . . and then she brought me books. Little Mue arrived with as many books as she could fit between her outstretched hands and her chin. They were the books that taught her how to read. Mue had questions for me; she wanted to hear my story; she wanted to tell me her story. And so, Mue taught me how to read and speak Thai (well, at least at a first-grade level). I do not for a moment pretend to be fluent in Thai, but I did begin to understand Mue.

I understood her when she told me about the man who came to her parents' home. She described his pressed suit and shiny shoes and gold jewelry. With great pride, she said he was going to give them a television and a refrigerator and she was going to work in Bangkok.

This warrants a bit of background. The village Mue and I lived in was just outside the Golden Triangle and one province over from the route through which people and illegal goods were trafficked. Mue's story of the glittery man was identical to the one another volunteer, who lived in a highly trafficked area, described to me. When the young girls in the volunteer's village disappeared, brand new shiny televisions and refrigerators stood in their place.

Mind you, Mue's family could not turn on the television or the refrigerator for lack of electricity, but it was a symbol of wealth and a promise of the income Mue would bring to her family in her new job in Bangkok. The parents, having never left the village, did not know that they would never see a penny Mue made and they did not know that the job was child prostitution. What they did know was that the Thai government only pays for the education of boys after age 12 and they knew that Mue was too small to be of much use in the rice fields. The glittery

man gave them hope that Mue could contribute.

Rest assured, Mue's parents did not send her to Bangkok. After hearing Mue's story, I realized that the only answer for her and the other young girls was an education. In addition to spreading awareness among the villagers about the lure of dishonest traffickers, I worked with the American Women's Club of Thailand to create a scholarship program for Mae Charim girls. When Mue turned 12, she became a recipient of the scholarship and, from my understanding, is still in school.

Mue is a hero because she taught a speechless person how to speak. She gave me a voice. Language and words are among the most powerful tools we have to express our ideas and cause change. A hero does not only know how to speak out. A hero teaches and inspires others to find and use their own voice. Mue did just that.

WHERE WE ARE

The injustice I confronted in Thailand and Zimbabwe outraged me and inspired my application to law school. I believed that, armed with a law degree, I could put an end to the trafficking, create greater protections, and defend human rights.

This brings me to "where we are today" and what I have learned as a lawyer. The best way to explain it is through the stories of our next three heroes.

After law school, I became an Equal Justice Works Fellow at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless in the District of Columbia. I had interned at the Legal Clinic in law school. It was during the internship that I was first introduced to the horrors of homelessness. I saw a struggle not entirely different from the one I witnessed in the Peace Corps. It was one of poverty, of danger, and of deadly disease. The major difference was that the one in the nation's capital was set against the backdrop of a thriving democracy and the world's largest economy.

When I visited the shelters, children showed me scars from rat bites and rashes from bed bugs. These children played in stairwells with guns instead of toys and instead of selling Girl Scout cookies, they were recruited to deal drugs. I listened to rumors about shelter staff who required an exchange of sexual favors for extra servings of food, blankets, or TV time. This prison-like atmosphere was punishment for being homeless. In that setting of despair, I met Mary (who prefers to be called "Grandma"), Ms. Jackson, and her daughter T'Roya.

Hero Three: Grandma

Grandma is 87 years old. For the majority of her life, she had a middle-class income and sometimes a little more. She told me that when she was young, her family was the first to test the segregation laws in Anacostia (a neighborhood in D.C.). This was her foundation and she raised her children upon it to be strong and independent.

However, her daughter suffered from an undiagnosed mental illness and self-medicated with illegal drugs. When her daughter was arrested for possession of a narcotic, her children were taken away. Grandma recognized that the foster care system is not always a safe place and took in her two grandchildren. She tried to take care of the growing boys with her Social Security and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families income. It was not enough and, with the "Section 8" program waitlist too long, she became homeless with the boys.

Once in shelter, Grandma was not only the caretaker of her own grandchildren; she also offered her compassion and care to all of the other children and parents. She was everyone's grandmother. She loved with a conviction that compelled her to stand up against anyone who harmed another individual. When staff members began to harass a gay couple living in shelter, threatening to expel one of the women, Grandma stepped between the couple and the staff members because, she said, she thought of them as her own daughters. She spoke out against the injustice she witnessed, scolding the staff members as if they were young children. In the end, the couple credited Grandma for the reason they were allowed to stay together. Grandma's heroism is one of selflessness, self-sacrifice, and fiercely standing up for that which you cherish.

Heroes Four and Five: Mr. Jackson and T'Roya

Ms. Jackson and her ten-year-old daughter, T'Roya, became homeless when illness and medical bills claimed Ms. Jackson's home and possessions. Homelessness traumatized T'Roya and broke Ms. Jackson down. Before they became homeless, T'Roya was an Honor Roll student and a shining star on the dance team. The once vibrant, happy, confident child began to pull her hair out, wet the bed, and burst into tears without provocation. Ms. Jackson knew that the monster torturing T'Roya was also harming the other children and adults who were homeless.

This is how I met Ms. Jackson. She came to me because she wanted to know how to protect these people and cause the change she envisioned. Do you remember how Mue taught me how to speak? It was my turn now to pay it forward and help Ms. Jackson use her own voice. I taught Ms. Jackson about her rights in shelter; I taught her how to juxtapose those rights with examples of how they were violated; I encouraged her to express her ideas for upholding the law and protecting people. She learned to testify before city council, to use the media to expose the harm she witnessed and to garner support for change, and she learned to gather others around her vision. Ms. Jackson organized the shelter residents and captured the attention of city council members and newscasters. As a result, major renovations were made in the shelter, including the firing of multiple corrupt staff members. It was a pivotal time of city council hearings and TV cameras and an empowered shelter population. It was the time of courageous individuals who lifted the heavy chains of shame, depression, despair, and hopelessness from around their necks and let them clamor to the concrete never

to be picked up again.

Ms. Jackson's courage to speak up—even at the risk of retaliatory eviction from shelter—not only inspired others to do the same, it also gave her daughter T'Roya a sense that her mother was going to keep her safe.

T'Roya's spirit began to brighten again and she shared her hope, her love, and her kindness with others—even with those most people would judge as unworthy of compassion. While Ms. Jackson was speaking out, T'Roya was leading her own quiet revolution. It was a battle to recapture childhood, to conquer the monster of homelessness.

T'Roya organized the children for playtime. She held an imaginary fashion show, employed the other children in a make-believe dress shop, and created secret worlds in which they could all find refuge.

T'Roya spread her hope and love and kindness into the adult world in the way only a child can. One Saturday, I caught T'Roya scrounging the parking lot for change. I did not discover until recently what she used the change for. There was a staff member who was particularly violent and vulgar with residents. T'Roya had learned that this staff member's favorite ice-cream was butter pecan. T'Roya collected loose change until she found enough money to buy a gallon of butter pecan ice-cream and two plastic spoons. She snuck her treasure into the shelter and surprised the staff member with it. As the two dug their spoons into the ice cream, T'Roya told the staff member about the fashion show she was organizing, the dance recitals she used to perform in, and her dream of one day becoming the Mayor of the District of Columbia.

When I was in high school I used to drive by a landfill. I remember passing that landfill one day and something colorful on the side of it catching my eye. After passing by a few times, curiosity got the best of me. I couldn't stop thinking about how it was possible for such a colorful thing to remain so bright in such a filthy and disgusting place. And so I pulled over one day for a closer look. There, on the side of the landfill, was a small patch of colorful wild daisies. Perhaps someone spread seeds there, or threw a plant out and it refused to stop growing. I don't know, but I had not thought about those bright flowers again until I met T'Roya. She shone light on a barren, horrid place, making it possible for the human spirit to thrive. I can't say that the staff member was never inappropriate again. I can say, though, that T'Roya planted daisies.

Hero Six: Jamila

When I was in law school, I met Jamila, who is a social worker in Washington, D.C., and I have called her a friend and colleague since then. When we met, we were both dreaming up the change we wanted to make for homeless children. Following Alice's lead, we wildly talked about impossible things before breakfast.

For me, it was through empowering parents and fighting unfair laws and practices through litigation and policy.

For Jamila, it was helping children reclaim their childhood. She is the only social worker for the 421 children who attend her elementary school in a dangerous Southeast neighborhood in Washington, D.C. Her students learn that they are unimportant on a continual basis. Their unimportance was reinforced when, twelve days before Christmas, their playground was closed for two days because the body of a murdered woman was found lying between the hopscotch squares and the monkey bars. Their unimportance was confirmed when the media only gave the murder two sentences of attention towards the back of the paper and the playground lights remain broken two and half years later. They are reminded of their insignificance every time they walk through the school house door—a door that is riddled with bullet holes from a shooting that occurred three years ago—a door the District hasn't replaced despite multiple requests. Her students learn they are as disposable as all of their belongings strewn across the sidewalk during the frequent evictions that take place. They weave in and out of homelessness, abuse, violence, poverty, and illness. They suffer emotionally and the toll their unimportance takes is all too apparent to Jamila.

Though the city's inaction seems to demonstrate otherwise, for Jamila, these children are the most important on earth so she dedicates her days to them and in the evening she visits their families. She visited one of her student's families during their eighth month in homeless shelter. Jamila watched children roaming in the unsafe place and recognized that their spirits had been stamped out and replaced with anger and tears. Jamila was determined to help them cope with the trauma of poverty and homelessness. She became a defender of childhood and, by giving homeless children the opportunity to work through their suffering through play, restored their imagination, their curiosity, their spirits. What began as Jamila and a few friends informally visiting the shelter to play with as many children as they could evolved into a non-profit organization with over one hundred volunteers that visit four shelters throughout the District on every day of the week. These children know they are valued, they are important, they are respected. They know they can be kids. Jamila reduced the traumatizing effect of homelessness and poverty and gave countless children in the District a fighting chance at passing through homelessness unscathed.

Jamila is a hero for so many reasons, but I want you to remember her for seeing something unjust and, instead of looking away, starting her own cause, her own revolution, her own change.

THE FUTURE: WHERE WE ARE GOING AND WHO WILL TAKE US THERE

Hero Seven: The Lasting Hero

This brings us to the future, to where we are going and, most importantly, the heroes who will take us there.

At this point, you may be thinking, "Those are nice stories, but what does a third-world country on the other side of the globe, a few people who are

homeless, and a social worker have to do with the law and with becoming a lawyer?" Everything. They have everything to do with the law and becoming a lawyer.

The stories I've told you demonstrate that there are battles between justice and oppression everyday, in every part of the world, and that many of these confrontations occur right where you are standing.

As a public interest lawyer you will serve as an instrument of justice in many of these battles. Whether you commit yourself to housing, homelessness, human rights, immigration law, voting rights, or the environment or become a civil rights lawyer, a legal services attorney, an associate, a public defender, or a judge, your charge as a lawyer is not only to make just that which is unjust, it is also to be outwardly focused on the world around you and to be ready to stand up where you are needed and to always respect and value the people you encounter, the people you represent, the people your work will impact.

You are not building change in isolation. You are connected to the people who laid bricks before you and you will be surrounded by clients, colleagues, government, society, and all those people who will pick up the effort in the future long after we are gone. Watch, listen, join forces with the heroes that came before you and that stand around you and do not for a moment hesitate to become one yourself.

The future for me, the place where we are going, has as much to do with you as all of the people we will collectively impact through our justice work. Just for a moment, let's peer into the looking glass and imagine the impossible world. Imagine the changes you would make. Imagine the world you went to law school to create. Imagine the better world you want for yourself and for your clients.

Now, ask yourself, "Who will create that world?" "Who will make that change?"

Did you hear a voice inside you screaming out, "I will!"? I trust that you did. I trust that you will join the ranks of my heroes: Umama, Mue, Grandma, Ms. Jackson, T'Roya, and Jamila. I know that you will because you are my seventh hero—you are the hero who will take us into the future. And in that future, I hope that you will remember the lessons of the heroes that came before you.

Remember that:

We are one village, one family, and we have one sacred duty to each other;

Remember to:

> Share your gifts and skills with those around you, in the same way that sharing banana leaves can change a village;

Speak out! Teach and inspire others to find their own powerful voice;

Be selfless, self-sacrifice, and fiercely stand up for that which you cherish;

Transform the status quo in the face of any injustice;

Bring your heart with you into the battlefield and give as much as you can;
Plant daisies in landfills; and
Start your own cause, your own revolution, your own change.

As we set off into the future, I believe that you will remember these lessons. I believe that you will not only courageously dream the impossible, you will achieve it. You will become the next champions of social justice. You are my lasting hero.