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## Bending the Arc

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## Bending the Arc

Emily A. Benfer

MARCH 7, 2009

EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS AWARDS DINNER  
INDIANA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW—INDIANAPOLIS

Good evening. Thank you for this great honor. I am incredibly grateful to be here with the lawyers, professors and individuals who define the type of attorney I strive to be. I am not unlike my first client, Ave Maria Ladson, a homeless woman I met in Washington, DC. She asked me where I studied law. I told her, “Indiana University” and, even before I began representing her, she said, “Well then, the best lawyers must be from Indiana.” I could not have said it better!

Little did Ms. Ladson know that this University made it possible for me to represent her by supporting students striving for social change. The Loan Repayment Assistance Program will affect change across the country and through it donors to the program will reach every client Indiana University students and graduates represent. Not only is Indiana producing the best lawyers, but with the assistance of LRAP, it is also fueling the flames of social justice.

On the third floor of our law school the words of Dr. Martin Luther King are etched outside of a classroom: “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”<sup>1</sup> As a student, I read those words and dreamt of the ways I would tug and pull on that arc until justice was realized. As a lawyer, I know the teachings of every professor at our law school prepared me to do just that. I also know that I continue to collect lessons in the practice of law.

The first lesson I embraced as a lawyer came from the homeless families I served. They taught me that it takes many, many hands to bend the arc toward justice. I met these families in squalid, overcrowded homeless shelters. My job was to teach them about their rights and to work with them on testifying before City Council to cause change in the abusive shelter system. I came to see, though, that my most important responsibility was to try to do for them what so many faculty and staff members had done for me—to inspire them to become catalysts for the social justice they sought. I did this primarily by listening, by supporting, by believing in them and their aspiration toward change. When City Council finally visited the shelter, 153 individuals and children greeted them. With hands fixed firmly on the arc, bending it in the direction of justice the families said, “My name is no one and I am invisible.” This statement marked not only the day Mr.

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1. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here?* in JAMES M. WASHINGTON, ED., *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS AND SPEECHES OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.* 252 (1986).

Belcher, Ms. Jackson, Ms. Benet, nine-year-old T'Roya and others were seen but also the day change began. With unprecedented speed, the City refurbished the shelter, removed infestations and moved many of the families into housing.

In my current position at Georgetown Law's Federal Legislation & Administrative Clinic,<sup>2</sup> I learned another lesson: that we must use all of our resources to safeguard rights and ensure justice. And perhaps one of our most important resources is our pen. Ten years ago, the Supreme Court severely restricted the reach of the Americans with Disabilities Act, striking people with epilepsy, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis and others from protection against discrimination. Outraged, lawyers from the disability community, myself among them, joined to create consensus and restore the law. Together, they successfully passed the ADA Amendments Act and extended equality to people with disabilities. These lawyers righted the way with their pen and their ability to persuade others toward the law's truest intent.

While the lessons abound, perhaps the most important is finding your inspiration to push down on the arc. For me, I know enduring motivation in my clients. One client, Tysha showed me five fingers when I asked her how old she was. She drew me a rainbow, held my hand, and whispered, "You are my best friend." I once asked Tysha about the homeless shelter she lived in and she began to cry. The little girl looked at me and asked, "Are you really going to help us?" I knew at that moment with absolute certainty that no matter what lies ahead or how weary I may become, the answer will always be, "Yes, Tysha, I will help."

Find your enduring inspiration to become a champion of social change. Gather your resources. And don't for a moment believe that your hands aren't needed. Dr. King said, "[the arc] bends towards justice." President Obama reminds us that, "here is the thing: it does not bend on its own. It bends because each of us in our own ways put our hand on that arc and we bend it in the direction of justice."<sup>3</sup> Together, we are the pressure that ensures the bending of the arc—we lean and push and litigate and organize with the knowledge that the outcome we provoke is unwavering justice.

The important work of LRAP allows us as attorneys to marshal unwavering justice every time we use the law in the pursuit of social change and whenever we support one another in the bending of the arc. You have done that by being here tonight. For that and for all you will do to bend the arc in your own ways, you have my admiration and deepest gratitude.

Thank you.

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2. The Federal Legislation & Administrative Clinic is a program of clinical legal education designed to teach law students how to become "legislative lawyers." Federal Legislation & Administrative Clinic website, at <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/clinics/flc/>.

3. President Barack Obama, *We All Have a Stake in Each Other*, Fort Wayne, Indiana, April 4, 2008.