

Recently, I was pleasantly surprised to be the winner of the Calgary Legal Guidance Alan D. Hunter Volunteer of the Year Award. I have only been actively involved with CLG for a few years, but I have enjoyed every minute spent volunteering with this amazing organization.

As lawyers, we like to think that what we are doing is part of a noble tradition that facilitates the very rule of law. While there may be an element of truth to that, there is also a large dose of pomposity. Speaking for myself, much of what I do as a lawyer has virtually no effect on the continued functioning, let alone improvement, of society. I may serve a role in the cogs of the legal system, but it is often far from obvious to me that this role has any significance when it comes to fostering the greater good.

When I was in law school, I remember seeing a graphic that was meant to comically represent the inevitable deterioration of those subjecting themselves to legal education. If I remember correctly, the image was composed of two pie charts which had sections for things like empathy, love of life, etc. The 'before' chart indicated a likeable, well-adjusted person. The 'after' chart indicated a person whose humanity had atrophied to an infinitesimally small level, and in the place of noble character and moral decency there was a focus on things like billable hours and strict adherence to rules. Of course, this was merely a self-deprecating cartoon. Lawyers are no different from others – we care deeply about our families, our co-workers, and our communities. While there are certainly things about the profession that can suck the life out of you, there are absolutely incredible moments in the practice of law, and many of those moments come about when you are not being paid (or not being paid particularly well).

When I volunteer with Calgary Legal Guidance, I have no doubt of the importance of what I am doing. I encounter people who cannot legally work, whose children cannot legally be educated in Canada. I encounter people for whom the notion of universal healthcare is a vapid fairy tale, as they are unable to afford access to the most basic of medical care within Canada's borders. Often, I encounter people who risk detention or deportation, not because they are bad people, but because they have simply erred within a complicated immigration system that has little tolerance for mistakes. In some cases, I can help these people. In other cases, I can't. But I never regret trying to help them, and I always feel enriched by the attempt.

At this moment, Calgary Legal Guidance is working to set up a system that will help Canadians sponsor refugees from places like Syria, Iraq, Eritrea, and other countries where daily life is not so wonderful. If you are a lawyer, or a law student, or you are willing to volunteer your time, you can be a part of this initiative. There is a statement, apparently of Talmudic origin, to the effect that, if you save one life, it is as if you have saved the entire world. If you assist in this important work, you will literally help save lives. And I guarantee you will find more joy in your own.