

Do you remember your first time? Do you remember feeling nervous and excited and not sure what to expect? Were your palms sweaty? Did you have butterflies? I'm speaking, of course, about the first time you appeared in court as an attorney! What did you think I meant? I recently had the pleasure of appearing in court with a newly licensed attorney, Nathaniel "Rioux" Jordan, through Metro Volunteer Lawyers (MVL).

How did Rioux's first court appearance come about? I have been an MVL board member for the past two years as a representative for the 18th Judicial District. The law firm where I work is primarily comprised of civil litigation attorneys with a four-member family law group. Unlike our family law group, court appearances are not a weekly (or even a monthly) occurrence for most of the civil litigation attorneys, and appearing in court at all is a very rare occurrence for new associates.

Rioux was sworn in and joined our firm in November 2018, after having passed the July Colorado Bar Exam. Like many young attorneys practicing in civil litigation, Rioux has spent the past eight-plus months researching and writing briefs and observing depositions. Like many young attorneys, Rioux was eager to go to court, but the opportunity had not yet presented itself.

When I approached Rioux about volunteering for MVL at a Family Law Court Program, he eagerly said "yes!" Not only was Rioux looking forward to his first court appearance, but like so many new lawyers, he sincerely believes in giving back to the community. I am relieved to find many younger attorneys are still instilled with the importance of volunteering their time and legal talents starting in law school, with many law schools mandating that they volunteer a set number of hours to graduate. Rioux was no exception and was required to have 50 pro bono hours to graduate from the University of Denver Sturm College of Law.

Rioux and I signed up for the Family Law Court Program (FLCP) in Arapahoe County for a May appearance. The FLCP program is a legal clinic held for low-income parties on a monthly or semi-monthly basis in Adams, Arapahoe, Denver, Douglas, and Jefferson counties. FLCP cases are always non-contested. Depending on the day of the clinic, volunteer attorneys provide services ranging from conducting an initial intake meeting to walking the parties through the process and completing the necessary paperwork to file with the court, to appearing for the final permanent orders hearing. We signed up for a date when permanent orders hearings were taking place.

When Rioux and I arrived at the Arapahoe County District Court, Elizabeth Jones, the FLCP coordinator from MVL, was already present. Elizabeth advised us there was only one hearing that day for an allocation of parental responsibilities, and she provided us with all of the information we needed to meet with our client and finalize the Parenting Plan. Rioux and I were introduced to our client, "Steve," and his child's mother, "Julie." We went over the terms each party wanted for parenting time and decision-making authority, which provided Rioux the opportunity to engage in settlement negotiations. We helped Steve work out a parenting time schedule with Julie and finish their Parenting Plan.

It was time to appear in front of the magistrate to take testimony from the parties regarding the terms of their agreement. Elizabeth provided Rioux with a list of questions he was required to ask Steve during his testimony. Rioux went through each of the questions seamlessly and the Parenting Plan was approved. Steve was very grateful for Rioux's help. Rioux and I both had the satisfaction of knowing we helped young parents reach an agreement regarding their young child. And we were able to do so in less than three hours!

What does this mean for attorneys reading this article?

Do you remember your first time? Do you remember feeling nervous and excited and not sure what to expect? Were your palms sweaty? Did you have butterflies?

Whether it is your first time appearing in court, or your hundredth, MVL and low-income families need your help. MVL staff makes appearing at an FLCP clinic a convenient and easy way to give back to the community. Fortunately, it does not matter if you do not have prior family law experience. MVL's mission is to help facilitate access to justice. To that end, MVL staff will be present to answer any questions you may have. As a volunteer with MVL, you will be provided with a comprehensive list of forms that need to be completed, along with a script of questions to ask your client when he or she is testifying.

For you young attorneys, please consider taking the time to either volunteer with MVL at an FLCP or take on a pro bono family law case. MVL can provide you with a mentor and you will gain invaluable legal knowledge and court experience while helping a client who cannot afford legal representation.

Rioux's next court appearance? He has agreed to accept a contested pro bono family law case with me serving as his mentor. I told him the second time is much easier. To volunteer with MVL, you can go to the MVL website at denbar.org/mvl.



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