



UPDATES - May 2018

## Help, with a Heart

by [Lim Hui Min](#) and [Lynda Lee](#)

“ “Help, with a Heart” – THE LAWYERS OF THE LEGAL AID BUREAU

The Legal Aid Bureau (LAB) celebrates its 60th Anniversary<sup>1</sup> this year. This article features three of its legal officers and a volunteer lawyer, who share why they chose to work at LAB, and what they do.

## A Meaningful Job

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*“I became a lawyer to help people. I help the poor widow, the down-trodden and the oppressed. It is very satisfying to help people who would otherwise have been helpless. One of the best things about working at LAB is that I know what I do can make a difference to someone’s life... Most of them see LAB as their last hope.*

– Louis D’Souza, Director 1 (Legal Representation and Advisory Division), deputy to the Director of Legal Aid.<sup>2</sup>

Louis has been with LAB for the past 18 years. He has handled tens of thousands of cases, and mentored and supervised many generations of legal officers and staff. He does not hear from most applicants whom he has helped, once their cases are over. They move on with their lives and do not come back to LAB. He takes it on faith that what he has done has helped them in some way, and made their lives better. But the occasional applicant will surprise him with the magnitude of their gratitude – and seem to be a voice for all the rest whom he did not hear from again:

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*“Every Christmas, without fail, I receive a card from an applicant I represented many years ago. I remember how anxious she was when she first came to see me. She had young children and the divorce papers had just been served on her. I also remember how happy she was when she got the custody and care and control of the children. She kept thanking me. Her little boy even made me an origami card.*

*At that time, I could not understand why she was so thankful. The divorce was acrimonious but not that acrimonious. Neither was it very different from other divorces I had handled. For me, ‘divorce’ was a familiar word, because by the time I represented her, I had handled hundreds of divorces.*

*But for her, it must have been one of the darkest moments of her life. It was probably the first and the last time she would go through a divorce. I suppose, when she had someone to walk with her through the divorce proceedings, she must have felt like she had a light to guide her in those dark moments.”*

It is a meaningful job, to be the guiding light for another human being in their time of trouble. Sometimes, it is guiding them through a divorce. Other times, it is helping them claim compensation for a road accident, or doing the necessary paperwork to take out letters of administration or to apply to be the deputy of a person without mental capacity. On occasion, it is even to protect them from further physical harm:

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*“One time, I represented an applicant for a Personal Protection Order (PPO) matter. She wanted a PPO against her husband. She was very young. She was just a teenager when she got pregnant, and ended up marrying the man — her husband. He was a charming and fun-loving person, but whenever he lost his temper, he would hit her. Usually, he would punch her in the face so that everyone could see the bruises. He would also call her a ‘cheap woman’ or tell her to sleep with other men. Things came to a head one night when he hit her in public. He punched her so badly that she blacked out.*

*The matter went for trial because the husband refused to agree to give her a PPO. He said he was not a violent person. However, he admitted in court, when I cross-examined him, that he had hit her. The Court eventually granted her the PPO.*

*The applicant’s friends had been sitting outside the courtroom during the trial.<sup>3</sup> When the applicant came out of the courtroom, they immediately surrounded her and cheered when they found out she got the PPO.*

*I was heartened to see that the applicant had people who really cared about her and were there for her. I also felt good seeing her get the outcome she wanted.*

*Before we parted, I wanted to make sure she stayed on the right track. She was very young, barely in her twenties. Lack of life experience had her mixed up with the wrong people. So I told her to be careful about the people she let into her life, and to stay away from people who behaved like her husband.”*

– Sunari Kateni, Deputy Director of Legal Aid<sup>4</sup>

## Beyond the Law

The advice given by Sunari to the young applicant went beyond legal advice. It was life advice, like what an elder brother would give a younger sister.

LAB lawyers often extend help to applicants which goes beyond just legal advice and representation:

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*“Most applicants... think their problem is a legal one. But really, the problems come from personal issues. What they need is someone to tell them how to solve their personal problems. I sometimes find myself giving advice on debt management and budgeting. I also see that sometimes, all an applicant needs is a listening ear for their problems and to be understood.*

*.... There was one elderly man I saw who needed more than legal help. He told me his son wanted to sell his flat and asked what he should do. He also told me he had no money and would have to walk home. He seemed vacant and lost. So I referred him to social services. I felt so sorry for him.”*

– Vanisha Chandiramani, Volunteer Assistant Director of Legal Aid <sup>5</sup>

For many applicants, their legal problems are merely symptoms of deeper-rooted issues, such as financial and housing problems, family violence, dysfunctional family relationships, mental health issues, and so on. For such applicants, LAB has established referral protocols and systems with social service organisations, and can refer the applicants to such organisations for help, with their consent. LAB will also liaise with the applicants’ social workers and other helping professionals to exchange necessary information and ideas on how to better help the applicant.

In one case, LAB acted for a young applicant who had moved out of the family home into a crisis shelter. She wanted a PPO against her father, whom she said had sexually abused her since she was 11 years old. Her family turned against her when she finally spoke up about the abuse and made a police report against her father. When she first came to LAB, the applicant was fearful and timid. Whenever she had to describe what her father did to her, her body would jerk, she would dig her fingernails into her hands and lapse into crying fits. But despite the trauma and isolation she suffered, the applicant soldiered on with the case. LAB worked closely with the applicant’s social workers to ensure that she was well-supported during the whole court process, which ended with the applicant getting a PPO:

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*“I liked that we managed to work together with her social worker at the crisis shelter and at the family violence specialist centre to help her in the most comprehensive way possible. It made me realise how important it is to provide holistic help to applicants who need it, and the importance of communication between agencies.*

*When the judge granted our applicant the PPO she needed, our applicant burst into tears. She was so overwhelmed with relief that we had to physically hold her up.”*

– Joan Pang, Assistant Director of Legal Aid, who was the legal officer in charge of the case.

## Like Being With Friends and Family

It is not just the meaningful work which keeps LAB lawyers going, however. It is the people they work with. For Louis, LAB is like his second home:

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*“Every day here is like a large family gathering. There are young people who are eager to help. There are older people who look out for the younger ones. And food in the pantry, which everyone contributes to, is in ample supply! There is a certain positive vibe at LAB that makes me look forward to coming to work. The work and the people who work at LAB – that’s what kept me going for the last 18 years at LAB.”*

One of the young people who is “eager to help” is Public Service Commission scholar Joan, who has been with LAB for just two and a half years. This is her first job. She wanted to come to LAB after being an intern here in her third year of law school:

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*“I found the environment very welcoming — people were friendly and happy. I also wanted to be grounded in the reality that many of our applicants face, their struggles with money, jobs, health...and have a chance to make a tangible difference to their lives. I wanted to be in a place that would allow me to become a better person – to develop a greater sense of empathy, patience and understanding.”*

Working in LAB is a pleasure for her because of the people:

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*“I love my colleagues. They are not just people I work with. They are also people whom I have come to call my friends. When I want to discuss a case, my colleagues will readily give their time for a discussion. When I am away from work, they never fail to offer their help.*

– Joan

Sunari agrees:

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*“I like the environment I work in. The reporting structure is flat which makes it easy for people to chat with each other. There is also a culture that encourages learning and knowledge sharing. So if I had a case, I would not be shy to discuss it or bounce off ideas with my colleagues, no matter how senior or junior they are.”*

Even our volunteers feel LAB’s familial warmth:

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*“During my first two months... from the counter staff to the lawyers, everyone helped me. There was no question too silly for them. I always look forward to Wednesday afternoons. That is my time-slot for volunteering at LAB.”*

– Vanisha

## **This Too Shall Pass ...**

Good colleagues and meaningful work are not always enough to get through the day, however. The caseload is high. There are days when sadness and misery seem to be the only themes in the stories told by the applicants, and every solution which presents itself seems like a candle in the wind.

It is in such times that unexpected light-hearted moments arise, like shafts of sunlight — the small but glorious gifts that life brings to those who work with passion and compassion:

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*“Once, I advised an applicant who owed someone money. There were no legal issues. It was a matter of whether he could pay the debt or not. He was friendly and straight-talking so I was frank with him. I told him he was better off buying 4D than hiring a lawyer. Some years later, I took a taxi that happened to be driven by this applicant! He remembered me and he said he took my advice that day. He bought 4D using the queue number he took at LAB to see me. As luck would have it, he won \$10,000. He paid off the debt with the winnings. He also never had to see a lawyer since that day!”*

– Louis

It is also in such times that we need to remember to be patient, and see the bigger picture: life will go on, somehow.

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*“My life motto has always been ‘This too shall pass’. Good things. Bad things. These will all pass. Nothing lasts forever. I sometimes say this to some of my applicants who are overwhelmed by their problems. I would tell them that they cannot expect the sun to shine every day. Neither will it rain forever. And know in their hearts that what is happening to them now will not last. In fact, in life, one needs both the sun and the rain to live. So they mustn’t let their present problems define what their life is.”*

– Louis

This is a message of hope, residing in reality. For LAB’s lawyers, this is what we try to give every applicant who comes through our doors. Help, with a heart.

Under section 3(1) of the Legal Aid and Advice Act (Cap.160), the Minister may appoint a person to be the Director of Legal Aid and may also appoint such number of Deputy Directors and Assistant Directors of Legal Aid as he may consider necessary for the proper carrying out of the Act.

LAB's Legal Officers are Legal Service Officers in the Singapore Legal Service.<sup>6</sup> There are 20 Legal Service Officers at LAB.

### **Volunteer Assistant Directors of Legal Aid (VADLA)**

The Volunteer Lawyer Scheme, launched in 2008, enables lawyers without practicing certificates to help the less privileged at LAB by being gazetted as Assistant Directors of Legal Aid. These VADLAs fall into two categories:

1. **Advice and Support Lawyers** — This group of volunteers give legal advice to members of the public as a Duty Officer at LAB; some may also do work such as research and drafting court documents for case-files under the supervision of a Legal Officer, or assist with administrative court hearings such as pre-trial conferences
2. **Case Lawyers** — This group of volunteers take on case-files, doing the same work that a Legal Officer would do on the file, ie, legal advice and representation

A nominal allowance of \$30 will be provided for each Duty Officer session to Advice and Support Lawyers to defray transport costs. Case Lawyers may be paid for each case of up to a maximum of \$500, which will include standard disbursements.

There are 14 VADLAS at LAB.

### **How to sign up as a VADLA?**

Suitable candidates are lawyers who have retired from full-time practice, lawyers who are on sabbatical or extended maternity leave, and academics. They must be qualified persons within the meaning of the Legal Profession Act (Cap. 161). Interested candidates can apply directly to LAB's External Relations Unit at [LAB-ERU@lab.gov.sg](mailto:LAB-ERU@lab.gov.sg).

The Legal Aid Bureau aims to provide quality legal aid, advice and assistance to persons of limited means. We offer legal representation in a wide range of civil matters including divorce, monetary claim, custody of children, estate matters and claim for compensation in injury or medical negligence cases. Additionally, the Bureau is supported by a panel of volunteer lawyers, known as Assigned Solicitors. These lawyers handle cases that require special areas of expertise such as cases involving Syariah Law.

For further information, please refer to our website at:

<https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/content/lab/en.html>.

## **Footnotes**

1. LAB's Corporate Video that commemorates its 60th Anniversary is available for viewing at [www.mlaw.gov.sg/content/lab/en/about-us/corporate-video.html](http://www.mlaw.gov.sg/content/lab/en/about-us/corporate-video.html)
2. Louis D'Souza is one of LAB's Legal Officers. He was an intern with LAB in the late 1970s when he was still a law student. After law school, he joined LAB, in 1982. A year later, he was posted to the then Subordinate Courts as a Magistrate, Deputy Registrar and Coroner, and later served there as a District Judge. In the year 2000, he was posted back to LAB, where he has remained ever since.

3.	The friends could not enter the courtroom to watch the trial as PPO trials are not open to the public.
4.	Sunari Kateni started his legal career as a Deputy Public Prosecutor with the Attorney-General's Chambers in 1993. He went on to work in the Insolvency and Public Trustee's Office in 1999, the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority in 2006 and finally, in LAB in 2014. Sunari was also an ad-hoc President at the Syariah Court from 2007 to 2011.
5.	Vanisha has been a Volunteer Assistant Director of Legal Aid for one and a half years. She practised law for a few years in the 1990s, then got married and relocated to Taiwan with her family, where she lived for seven years, before moving to China to live for 13 years. Thereafter, she and her family returned to Singapore. Vanisha learned Mandarin during her time overseas and speaks in Mandarin to our Mandarin-speaking applicants!
6.	More information on the Singapore Legal Service can be found at <a href="http://www.lsc.gov.sg">www.lsc.gov.sg</a>



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