



UPDATES - July 2018

## Hidden Figures — The Legal Executives of the Legal Aid Bureau

by [Lim Hui Min](#) and [Rae-Anne Lim](#)

The Legal Aid Bureau celebrates its 60th Anniversary<sup>1</sup> this year. This article features four of its Legal Executives, who share why they have chosen to work at LAB, and what they do<sup>3</sup>.

When most people think of the Legal Aid Bureau (**LAB**), they will think of its lawyers. LAB has 20 lawyers. They are also known as Legal Officers (**LOs**). But it is not commonly known that LAB also has a team of 20 Legal Executives (**LEs**), who are the “hidden figures” behind the lawyers.

## The Legal Executives — Who They Are and What They Do

The LEs are paralegals, who assist the LOs with the Bureau’s cases. Some LEs have law degrees, some have a Diploma in Law and Management from Temasek Polytechnic and yet others have university degrees from other disciplines such as engineering, political science and geography.

Each file has a team of one LE and one LO. The LEs act as a liaison between the LOs and the applicants. They do the first draft of standard court documents, monitor court correspondence and take care of administrative tasks such as e-filing and bankruptcy searches. Prior to filing the court documents, they also assist divorce applicants to negotiate and come to amicable settlements with the other party. Every LE is effectively bilingual, speaking one of the national languages in addition to English, with some speaking Chinese dialects as well. They communicate with the applicants in their various languages and where necessary, even help interpret for walk-in applicants during legal advice sessions.<sup>2</sup> In addition, all LEs have been gazetted as Commissioners for Oaths. They are able to administer oaths or affirmations for affidavits to be used in proceedings in the Singapore Courts, or statutory declarations to be used in Singapore. This ensures that applicants who are already in financial difficulty do not need to incur additional costs for such matters.

Finally, all LEs are trained in handling emotionally distressed applicants and making social service referrals for those who need them. Many applicants come to LAB with more than legal problems. They may also face other issues such as housing issues, family violence issues, severe family dysfunction, mental health problems and so on. The LEs have been trained to spot applicants' social service needs, and refer them to appropriate agencies for help, with their consent.

Some applicants may be too distressed or upset to give coherent instructions or listen to advice. An LE is rostered each day as a "First Responder", to help deal with these particularly distressed applicants, by engaging with them, calming them down and referring them to social service help if necessary.

In cases where the applicant is particularly vulnerable, the LEs work closely with the applicant's social worker(s) to provide co-ordinated support to the applicant. For example the LE can arrange for the social worker to accompany an applicant to an appointment at LAB or to court proceedings, or to help the applicant get certain information or documents. The LE can also update the social worker on the progress of the legal proceedings, which will help the social worker plan how best to help the applicant, for example, if the social worker is made aware of when the applicant is likely to obtain a maintenance order in her divorce proceedings, he/she can arrange for the applicant to get financial help in the interim.

As can be seen from the above, the job of an LE is multi-faceted, requiring both technical skills and knowledge, language skills, as well as the soft skills of client management and empathy. The caseload is heavy<sup>4</sup> and the cases can be emotionally draining and demanding.

## **Who are the People Who Work as LEs, and Why Do They Do It?**



***Giving Back to Society***

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“I joined LAB because I wanted to help people with limited means. I was a recipient of education bursaries and was grateful for the assistance. I wanted to give back to society in return for the help I had received.”

Graclyn Wong, LE <sup>5</sup>

This is Graclyn’s eleventh year in LAB as an LE. She would have served at least 11, 000 applicants by now! Many have been in difficult circumstances, and she has had to provide comfort to a fair number, both men and women, who have broken down and cried in front of her. There was even an applicant whose tears she managed to turn into laughter:

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“The applicant was in her 40s... She had opened a divorce file and I was meeting her for her Form 1 session <sup>6</sup> to obtain her instructions.

The moment I asked for her reasons for divorce, the applicant started sobbing. Her husband’s affair devastated her, and even more so, when she found a CPF letter stating that her husband had used his CPF monies to pay for his mistress’ delivery charges in KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital! To add to her misery, her husband left her. Alone, the applicant had to work tirelessly for 16 hours each day just to support her four children aged 16, 15, 11 and 9.

It was hard to hear what she was saying because she was sobbing so much. I did my best to console her and reminded her to be strong for the sake of her four children. I said: “There will always be a rainbow after the rain”. Somehow, when I said that, it was as if something clicked inside her. She stopped crying. There was a gradual change in her from then on. When I met her subsequently, she became more cheery and even joked with me. On the third time I met her, I told her a joke, and her response truly warmed my heart. She said “Thank you, Ms Wong. This is the first time that I have laughed so heartily in the past 12 years.””

## ***Making a Difference***

Being able to journey with others through their tough times is meaningful. There may not be any fanfare and could involve simply offering a listening ear or giving encouragement. The LE does more than legal support work on a file. He or she often has to play the role of a counsellor, a confidante, a problem-solver, and even a voice for those who are not able to speak for themselves.

Who would have thought that the simple act of writing a letter for an applicant could change someone’s life?

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“One of my most memorable cases was a matter which I handled when I first joined LAB. We helped a lady, at her request, to write a letter to the Housing Development Board (HDB) to ask for an extension of time to sell her flat. She did not know how to write such a letter. HDB agreed to the request. I informed the applicant, who was very grateful for our assistance. Some years passed and I forgot about the matter. One day when I happened to be walking along Little India, a lady came up to me and hugged me. I was startled by her friendliness and only recognized her afterwards. It was the applicant! I didn't expect that such a seemingly small act on my part to draft a letter meant so much to the applicant. It was very heart-warming.”

Shanthi Raman, Senior Executive of the External Relations Unit<sup>7</sup>

Yet not all applicants are easy to handle. Many are anxious and agitated about their cases, and LEs have to be very patient and understanding with them.

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“I met an applicant who wanted to vary an Order of Court regarding the sale of the matrimonial flat. Unfortunately she misunderstood our advice and went ahead to sell the matrimonial flat before we could obtain leave from Court to amend the Order of Court! This meant that we had to scramble to get the Order amended before the completion date for the sale of the flat. It was a very tight timeline. The applicant was frantic and panicky throughout the process. She called me nearly every day to plead for us to expedite the process, even though we kept explaining that we were doing our best, but it also depended on the court's schedule. In her desperation, she even threatened to lodge a complaint against us! The lawyer and I worked very closely on the matter as we knew how important it was to the applicant. Eventually, we managed to help the applicant to vary the Order in the nick of time. The applicant was able to sell her flat as planned, and she was very grateful to us. She even apologized for her behaviour.”

Nathaniel Tay, LE<sup>8</sup>

Nathaniel has always wanted to help others, especially the less privileged:

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“To me, going the extra mile should be the norm. Each case is not merely a case, it is a life being affected by something, which we can do something about. I am glad that I can play a part to help someone in need.”

Not all applicants want to be helped, though. Such cases also require understanding on the LEs' part — that while you may want to go the extra mile to help the applicant, you need to respect the applicants' personal choices on how they wish to live their lives.

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“There was a 70 plus year old lady who approached LAB for assistance to divorce her husband, who had deserted her for more than 13 years. She was homeless and had been sleeping on a staircase through the years. To make a living, the applicant worked as a cleaner earning barely enough to feed herself. I tried to refer her to social services for further assistance but she refused. She told me that she is independent enough to take care of herself.”

Noor Omairah, LE <sup>9</sup>

For that case, we helped the applicant get the divorce she wanted — and that was all she really wanted:

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“When I met her to release her divorce papers, she broke down and thanked me profusely. She repeatedly apologised that she could not treat me to a cup of coffee because she did not have enough money. I assured her that that was no issue, as I was unable to accept any form of payment or gifts from applicants. That was a touching and emotional day for me and I will probably remember that day for a long time.”

Omairah

## The LAB Family

The touching moments, poignant moments, and moments of gratitude behind the scenes, are what make the work at LAB so meaningful. But they are like pearls from the deep — many days at sea pass before you chance upon one. There are many days where applicants can be curt and angry, good intentions can be misunderstood, and the hard work is simply... very hard.

In such times, what keeps the LEs going is the LAB family:

*“The colleagues are good. You can generally talk to anyone and ask them for help. There is a flat reporting structure. Anyone can walk into the room of even our most senior LO to have a chat.”* Shanthi

*“I like the working environment. Everyone is generally friendly and welcoming, whether LOs or LEs. I like that while being able to help others meaningfully, I am also surrounded by people who are fun to joke and laugh with.”* Graclyn

*“I like that I can simply walk over to any of my colleagues, even the LOs, to ask them questions regarding cases or anything at all. It is a friendly environment.”* Nathaniel

It is hard to be kind to others, if no one is kind to you. Feeling part of a family at work, is what helps the LEs treat the applicants like their family members, and inspires the LEs to go the extra mile for the applicants.

*“We share our problems and come up with solutions together. I know that I will not go through a bad day alone!”*  
Omairah



To most of the world, the LEs are “hidden figures”. But for our LOs, they are part of the same family, and members of the same team. For our applicants, they are the face of LAB — their first port of call, their guide, and finally, their well-wisher, at the close of the case.

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 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. The Bureau was set up in 1958 to ensure access to justice for those of limited means. Singapore was the first country in South East Asia to have a legal aid scheme. From its inception until now, the Bureau has helped more than 400,000 less privileged people with their civil proceedings. LAB’s Corporate Video and e-publication commemorating its 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary are 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. LAB runs daily legal advice sessions on weekdays, from 8.30am to 5pm for members of the public. For more details, see: <https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/content/lab/en/about-us/contact-us.html>
3. There were two earlier Singapore Law Gazette articles on the Assigned Solicitors of LAB titled “Fighting for the Underdog — The Assigned Solicitors of the Legal Aid Bureau” published in March 2018, and the Legal Officers of LAB titled “Help, With a Heart — The Lawyers of the Legal Aid Bureau” published in May 2018.
4. At any one time, an LE’s average caseload is about 120 cases.
5. Graclyn graduated from Temasek Polytechnic’s Law and Management Course in 2005. She worked in Lawhub LLC and Madhavan Partnership as a paralegal before joining LAB in 2007.
6. A “Form 1 session” refers to the first meeting that the Legal Executives have with applicants to obtain their instructions for the case. The format of Form 1 is prescribed under the Legal Aid and Advice Regulations (Revised Edition 1995).
7. Shanthi joined LAB in 2009. She graduated from Temasek Polytechnic’s Law and Management Programme and worked in private law firms such as Mark Goh & Co, Withers KhattarWong (formerly known as KhattarWong LLP) and Tan Kok Quan Partnership as a paralegal before joining LAB. She is now a Senior Executive of LAB’s External Relations Unit, which deals with, amongst other things, LAB’s interns, volunteers and publicity and communications matters.
8. Nathaniel graduated from the National University of Singapore with a Degree in Political Science. He joined LAB in September 2015. He has always had a strong desire to help the less privileged in society and has been a volunteer with the Singapore Boys Hostel, and with TOUCH Community Volunteer Programme to provide free tuition to low-income families.
9. Noor Omairah graduated from Temasek Polytechnic’s Law and Management Programme and joined LAB immediately upon graduation. She has been working in LAB for five years now.



**Lim Hui Min**

Director

Legal Aid Bureau



**Rae-Anne Lim**

Legal Executive

Legal Aid Bureau