



UPDATES - March 2018

## Fighting for the Underdog – The Assigned Solicitors of the Legal Aid Bureau

by [Lim Hui Min](#), [Joan Pang](#) and [Adrian Gerard Woon](#)

*“I had a client who married when she was still a minor. She had tried to be a good wife and mother – she had 3 children whom she cared for, and also ran the household. But the husband was violent and often beat her. She even had to undergo a hysterectomy to remove her uterus because of injuries caused by the husband’s beatings! My client wanted out of the marriage but the husband did not want to give her a single cent from the sale of the matrimonial flat. I’m happy to say that we obtained a court order that awarded her half the sale proceeds in the divorce.” Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim<sup>1</sup>*

Mr Zhulkarnain is one of the Assigned Solicitors of the Legal Aid Bureau (LAB), and this was one of his cases. He heard from the client sometime after the divorce. She had remarried and gotten a job. She told him that she was grateful for the assistance that she had received from him during the lowest point in her life. *“I was happy,”* said Mr Zhulkarnain, *“to have played a part in the client’s journey from a vulnerable, abused wife to a strong and empowered woman.”*

The LAB celebrates its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. For the past 6 decades, we have had the help of our Assigned Solicitors in fulfilling our mission of providing legal representation and advice to persons of limited means. Assigned Solicitors can have varying years of experience, come from small firms or big firms, and practise different areas of the law.

However, the one thing they have in common is their desire to give back to society, in return for all that they have received in their own lives, and to “pay it forward” – to do good in the hope that whoever they have helped would in turn be able to help another.

*“I find legal aid cases very relatable. My family was not well-off when I was young. When my mother encountered legal issues, she had to struggle through them alone as she could not afford a lawyer. I take on legal aid cases so that others don’t have to be in that situation.” Ms Alyssa Mundo<sup>2</sup>*

*“I want to fight for the underdog, and to help those who have been taken advantage of. I am a believer in karma – what goes around, comes around.”* Mr Christopher Bridges<sup>3</sup>

Mr Bridges recounted one case where the Applicant<sup>4</sup> had been employed as an Assistant Teacher at a preschool. She decided to quit because the school had been exploitative and the working conditions were poor – the school then sued her for \$8,800. Mr Bridges managed to get the school’s claim dismissed, and even successfully represented her in claiming \$4,000 in unpaid wages from the school. The Applicant later sent him an email thanking him for his help. She said she would have given up hope if he had not been there for her.

Many Assigned Solicitors are drawn to legal aid work because they have a passion for family law, and the work is a good avenue to marry their aspirations of helping the underprivileged and their love for family law work.

*“During the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of my law degree at NUS, I did an internship at LAB. I really enjoyed my time there, and my experience at LAB fuelled my passion for family law. I also have a strong interest in social work. When it comes to legal aid cases, social and legal issues are often two sides of the same coin.”* Mdm Belinda Ang<sup>5</sup>

Any lawyer with a Practising Certificate can apply to be appointed as an Assigned Solicitor. However, having a *sincere attitude* towards legal aid work is crucial. Not everyone has the heart for the work:

*“The approach to cases should be the same – the same level of effort and standard of care should be applied regardless of the size of the case and who the client is. I make it a point to treat legally aided clients the same way I would treat a fee-paying client.”* Mr Zhulkarnain

*“Legal aid work is not glamorous work. One must nevertheless be prepared to embrace the Applicant, all the same. So even if Applicants come knocking on my door without an appointment, I will still try and see them.”*  
Mdm Ang

*“You have to do it for the right reasons. If a lawyer’s main motivation for doing legal aid cases is publicity, he will soon find that this is not enough to keep him going.”* Mr Bridges

Aside from the heart, good people management skills are equally important. Ms Mundo observed that many legal aid clients are not well-educated and may also be misinformed as to the law and legal processes:

*“You need to be very patient in listening and also explaining. Serving a legal aid Applicant requires me to be more creative and solution-focused. They have very little resources and are often under a lot of stress from matters like unemployment or chronic poverty.”* Ms Mundo

Mdm Ang echoed this view: *“You need to give the Applicants a chance to be heard and understood. But it is equally important to educate them on the legal process and manage their expectations on what can be done for the case. Setting ground rules are also important, for example, to give the lawyer the documents he asks*

*for on time. Otherwise, you might not be able to get the case done.”*

Lastly, if you are new to legal aid work, and especially if you are a junior lawyer, being *willing to learn and seek help* is necessary. Mr Zhulkarnain said that when he had just started out and was unsure of a procedural point or the direction to take for his Syariah Court cases, he was fortunate to have the benefit of a support system in the Bureau which he could tap on to clarify the doubts he had. Assigned Solicitors can and should also consult the legal officers on legal aid processes and procedures when they need to.

## **Why Sign Up as an Assigned Solicitor?**

Mdm Ang said that legal aid work gives young lawyers a chance to see action in court and work on cases independently. Mr Zhulkarnain shared this view, and added that a lot can be learned from doing many small cases, rather than just a few large ones. Legal aid work also gives lawyers a chance to interact with clients whom they would not see in private practice on a regular basis – Applicants are often vulnerable individuals, due to being elderly or poorly educated. This hones a lawyer’s communication skills. Interacting with those from other backgrounds can also provide valuable life lessons and new perspectives.

Mr Bridges commented that legal aid work keeps him grounded, and makes sure that he does not forget why he became a lawyer in the first place. Ms Mundo shared similar sentiments. She remarked that legal aid cases provide useful reminders that a legal career is more than just about making money – it is also about making a positive impact on the lives of others. Mdm Ang’s story below shows how true this is.

*“One of my Applicants was an elderly man. After his divorce was completed, he had to move out of his flat so that it could be sold. I paid him a visit, and helped him to pack what he needed and dispose of the rest. He was very grateful. As he was about to leave, he took two oranges from his altar and gave them to me as a gesture of thanks. Being an Assigned Solicitor is all about sharing your blessings, and growing as a person along the way.”* Mdm Ang

### **Who is an Assigned Solicitor?**

Assigned Solicitors are lawyers in private practice who represent legally aided clients in cases assigned to them by the LAB. They handle about a third of the LAB’s cases at any one time, taking on cases where both parties have qualified for legal aid, and cases involving specialised areas of law, such as medical negligence, road accidents and Syariah Court matters. They also attend Legal Aid Board meetings, together with the Director of Legal Aid, to decide whether aid should be granted to cases, based on their merits.

### **Becoming an Assigned Solicitor**

The Assigned Solicitors featured in this article are representatives of the many dedicated lawyers who work tirelessly to ensure that the poor are not denied justice merely because of their limited means. It is lawyers like these who are keeping the spirit of service alive within the legal community, and it is hoped that more will be willing to step forward and join their ranks.

Any lawyer who with an active Practising Certificate is eligible to apply to join the LAB's panel of Assigned Solicitors. For more information and to submit an application, please visit the LAB's website at: [www.mlaw.gov.sg/content/minlaw/en.html](http://www.mlaw.gov.sg/content/minlaw/en.html).

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. A partner at Dentons Rodyk's Litigation and Dispute Resolution and Arbitration practice group, and an Assigned Solicitor since 2011. As part of his pro bono work, he also volunteers in monthly legal clinics and sits on several boards of directors of Voluntary Welfare Organisations in Singapore. He has handled 72 assigned cases to date.
2. A first year associate at Messrs Esvaran & Tan, and a former intern at the Legal Aid Bureau, she joined the Bureau as an Assigned Solicitor after getting called to the Bar in 2016. She is currently handling her first assigned case.
3. A Director at Christopher Bridges Law Corporation who has been an Assigned Solicitor for 24 years. He has handled 189 assigned cases to date. He is heavily involved in pro bono work and is also on the panel of Legal Assistance for Capital Offences (LASCO) as Lead Counsel.
4. Clients who apply for legal aid are known as "Applicants".
5. A partner at Belinda Ang Tang & Partners, and an Assigned Solicitor for more than 3 decades, having handled 684 assigned cases to date.

**Tags:** L2



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