



2015 LEGAL AID

ANNUAL REPORT



Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid Changing Lives With Legal Help



CONNECTING LEGAL AID AND PRO BONO COUNSEL

A Journey from Trauma to Solid Ground in a New Country

Melvin barely remembers coming to the United States from Liberia at the age of six. He traveled with a woman who entered the U.S. as a refugee and claimed Melvin as her son. Soon after their arrival, she put him on a plane to Minnesota. He was met by another stranger introduced to him as “Grandma.” She provided a roof over his head through his childhood, but not much else.

Melvin kept a low profile moving through elementary school. When he got to junior high, he went out for seventh-grade wrestling where he befriended teammate Ty Farrell. Recognizing Melvin was in a less than stable home situation, Ty’s parents, John and Tara, often gave Melvin rides or money for food. One time, when Melvin was injured in a wrestling match, John and Tara went with him to the hospital.

“We hadn’t realized until then exactly how alone Melvin was,” says Tara. “When that grandma person Melvin lived with didn’t come and get him from the hospital, that’s when I knew he was going to be our kid for the rest of his life.”

Melvin’s “grandma” held all of his legal documents and would not give them to him. He didn’t know if he had a green card. The Farrells went to Melvin’s school counselor to find out how to proceed, and the counselor connected them with Rebecca Scholtz, staff attorney with Legal Aid’s Immigration Law Unit. She works closely with the Youth Law Unit on cases like Melvin’s.

“It’s tough for kids like Melvin,” says Rebecca. “When we begin to advocate for them, we have to delve deeply into their personal histories. It’s a lot to ask someone who’s already been through significant hardship to trust an attorney and tell their story. It requires a leap of faith on their part, and we can’t guarantee an outcome.”

“Melvin doesn’t like talking about his past,” says John. “Rebecca somehow earned his trust and got him to open up enough so she could get an understanding of what he’d been through.”

Between Melvin’s early childhood memories and information gained from a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request that produced his original immigration documents, Rebecca learned that Melvin’s parents were in Liberia. She connected the Farrells with a pro bono attorney at Faegre Baker Daniels LLP to help them get legal custody of Melvin. Meanwhile, Rebecca helped Melvin to get a work permit and to apply for Special Immigrant Juveniles Status (SIJS).

“SIJS is an important protection for vulnerable children and a way for them to acquire lawful permanent resident status,” says Rebecca. “It puts them on a path toward permanency and stability.”

“Working with Rebecca showed me who I am and where I’m from,” Melvin reflects. “Things people told me before, they aren’t true. I learned the truth about myself in this process.”

Things changed quickly for Melvin during and after the legal proceedings. He became part of the Farrell family, adjusting to their rules and expectations. They helped him with his classes and held him accountable for his homework.

“Before I moved in with the Farrells, I didn’t have any parent or guardian to lead me in the right way, so I was just doing my own thing,” he says. “It was scary to move into a family like that, but I trusted them.”

“Melvin was the missing piece in our family’s puzzle,” says Tara. “It felt right to bring him into our lives.”

With the work permit, Melvin was able to get a part-time job. He graduated from high school on time with a successful wrestling career, including fifth place in the sectional tournament. He’s now working a full-time construction job.

“We install doors and windows,” he says. “It’s a fast pace so I’m never bored, and I’m learning the trade. I hope to still be in construction in five years, but I want to get a degree. I’d like to have my own business one day.”

Melvin is also interested in working with kids like himself. He spoke recently with his high school coach about helping the wrestling team as an assistant coach.

“Melvin went from being a kid on his own to being part of a community,” says Rebecca. “He belongs to a family who loves him, and he belongs here in the United States. His strength of character was there all along. We gave him a boost through the complexities of the immigration system, and now his outstanding personal qualities and family support can take him wherever he chooses to go.”