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Nonprofit Law Firms Benefit Disenchanted Attorneys, 'In-Between' Clients

By Angela Morris

Published: Sep 7, 2016



Lee DiFilippo

Lee DiFilippo earned hefty paychecks for 13 years as a corporate transactional attorney in Big Law and later as in-house counsel to a couple of corporations.

But it wasn't enough.

"I was pushing paper for corporate America. I was paid a lot of money. But I never felt I was doing anything that benefited anyone," DiFilippo said.

In 2012, she found her true calling when she helped a poor woman get a divorce from an abusive husband. "I never knew there was such a need. I was always in an ivory tower in big high rises, working for firms, and I was shielded from it."

Following her passion and joining a growing movement across the country, DiFilippo now runs a nonprofit law firm in Austin—DiFilippo Holistic Law Center—to serve people who make too much money to qualify for legal aid, but too little to afford a traditional lawyer. Previously, DiFilippo worked at Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton and then at Reed Smith, before going-

in-house at Textron Systems and Bell Helicopter.

The growing popularity of nonprofit law firms aimed to help the "in-between" economic demographic stems, in large part, from a 2014 article in *The Atlantic*, which profiled Shantelle Argyle's organization, Open Legal Services, in Salt Lake City. Argyle, co-founder and executive director of Open Legal Services, said that since then, people in 35 states have called her, and she's consulted with two dozen to help them create nonprofits.

"We say we are starting a revolution," she said. "Every community should have its own nonprofit legal services provider."

Open Legal Services maintains [a list](#) of 24 similar organizations spread across the United States.

The founders of nonprofit firms hail from different backgrounds. Argyle said many are recent law graduates wanting to handle public interest work, but they can't find jobs in the nonprofit sector. They create their own nonprofit, which also allows these graduates to qualify for federal student loan forgiveness programs.

Other nonprofit firm founders are veteran attorneys who want a new future, Argyle said. Some are former legal aid attorneys who became cynical because they had to turn away so many potential clients, she said. Others are former big law attorneys who yearn to do public service.

"They are done with the status quo, and they want to break out and affect change," Argyle said.

DiFilippo's transformation to nonprofit advocate happened in a courthouse in Tyler, Texas. Her client was a woman who filed a pro se case, but the judge dismissed it because she didn't pay court costs. DiFilippo said her client was too poor to pay. She convinced an appellate court to reverse the dismissal and later returned to the district court—where it took only 10 minutes to secure her client's divorce.

"What stuck with me is we walked out of the courthouse and she said, 'Do you understand how powerless I feel? It took you 10 minutes to get me divorced, and I was completely shut out of the system,'" DiFilippo said. "I really felt the true impact a lawyer, with that law license, can have on people's lives."

Mitch, a professor at the University of Wisconsin Law School and the director of its Neighborhood Law Clinic, said he is studying the new nonprofit law firms. (Mitch uses one name rather than a first and last name.) He said he did a survey for a research paper to learn why lawyers want to launch nonprofit firms. Passion to help people is a common motivator, he said.

"The practice of law is a service industry, and access to justice is absolutely foundational," Mitch said. "Equal access under the law is engraved on the courthouses all over the country and the Supreme Court."

Mary Chicorelli launched her nonprofit, Equal Access Legal Services in Philadelphia, in July. She wanted to be an immigration and asylum attorney in law school, but couldn't find a job. So she practiced insurance defense, but wasn't satisfied, and later was laid off after five years. Chicorelli, a longtime volunteer for pro bono organizations, decided to create her own nonprofit firm after she heard a podcast about Open Legal Services.

"I believe that everyone should have equal access to an attorney, no matter what your income level," Chicorelli wrote in an email. "There are those that fall between the cracks, and that is where our firm steps up."

Christina Alkire, founder of Sage Legal Services Inc. in San Diego, also got the idea to launch a nonprofit after hearing about Open Legal Services.

"I knew that this was my way to help the approximately 80 percent of San Diegans who go to family court without an attorney," she wrote in an email.

Jasmine Elatab, co-founder and executive director of Advocates for Community & Transformative Justice in Boston, always wanted to help vulnerable communities. Elatab said in an email that most people she talks with still think the idea of a nonprofit law firm is revolutionary.

"I feel like perhaps more [nonprofit firms] are opening because the trailblazers are showing that there is a way and others have been following in their footsteps," she wrote.

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