

Being a First-Generation Law Student – Yongbin Chang

I stepped on stage, mic in hand, and saw over 300 people in the crowd. As an orientation leader, I was tasked with sharing about my college experience and why the audience - an assortment of parents, guardians, and loved ones - should be confident their student choice the right school.

It was on that stage that I came out as undocumented for the first time. When I stepped down from the stage, I began to fear outing myself as undocumented. But a student's father approached me. He had driven seven hours to attend orientation for his daughter, who was also first generation and undocumented. In tears, he shared that knowing that I could succeed - that I had succeeded - assured him that his daughter would be okay. It was brief, but that seminal moment changed who I wanted to be.

My parents, who were also undocumented, had urged me to stay silent for fear of deportation. Their anxieties had infected me, transforming my status into a shameful burden. Yet, the impact I wanted to make on others could not start from hiding in the shadows. I chose to speak, perhaps against my own sensibilities. What could have been a fatal mistake became the catalyst for the person I am today. I transformed my shame and anxiety about my immigration status into a source of strength.

This drove me to become a determined mentor and an outspoken leader. Part of my journey to where I am today is because I wanted to exemplify that someone like me could succeed - and did so. In undergrad, I sought to give back. I shared my story in the classroom and online in hopes of educating those who knew very little or were fearful to ask about what being undocumented meant. I worked with the Undocumented Student Program as part of its student staff and served as a liaison to other organizations and departments; taught a class on border communities and policies; led a group of students on a week-long service trip focused on immigration; and worked for a non-profit that gave me the opportunity to involve myself in legal memo writing, case consultations, and advocacy for the undocumented community.

At Berkeley Law, I publicly shared my story to raise awareness while the Supreme Court began its momentous hearing on the future of DACA. I volunteered at APILO's legal clinics, nearby DACA Clinics, the For People of Color Conference, and served as a mentor at the undergraduate Asian Pacific American Pre-Law Association, First-Generation Professionals, and in numerous nonprofits. I spent my first summer working with the East Bay Community Law Center's Housing Clinic doing eviction defense for the underserved and marginalized. In the age of COVID, this work was more crucial than ever.

I am, like several peers and mentors I've encountered, first-generation to law school and to graduate school in general. Since immigrating to the Bay Area in 1999, my parents and I struggled to find our place in the American fabric. I paid for undergraduate experience by myself, working upwards to four various jobs at one point to make ends meet. I would work in the morning, go to class, work in the afternoon, and then pick up a late-night shift to 3am. I applied for scholarships as if they were another job - because every dollar counted. Not only that,

I supported my family and sent money home. The greatest barrier, however, wasn't financial. It was the lack of knowledge in pursuing my next steps. I stumbled and made many mistakes as law school became an increasingly taller mountain to climb. At times, I doubted my capacity to enter law school. Once I was in law school, I doubted if I belonged.

It was through mentors, luck, and preparation that I am now able to attend Berkeley Law. I carry not just the weight of my own future but the weight of family's. The First Generation Law Student Scholarship would be so incredibly helpful in relieving my financial burden. My perspectives are motivated by my personal experience as a low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented student, grounded in my academic pursuit, and fueled by my desire to pay it forward. My own lived experiences drove me to the field of law, as I learned how competent, just lawyers could make a big impact. The law can legalize and harm, but it has the power to humanize and protect as well. This is a reality that I have not only seen but lived. I believe that through the law and the legal profession, I can serve the underserved, build generational capital for my family, and shape the legal profession to a better place.