On my first day of work, I was six years old. My father brought home a stack of dry-cleaning receipts and asked if I could alphabetize and file them accordingly. Of course, I was familiar with the faded green papers he handed me. The cleaners had been in my family for decades before I was born. It was my grandfather’s – my pappou’s – American dream realized and in more recent years, a manifestation of my father’s innovative spirit. The dry cleaners is also what has both inspired and enabled me to pursue a legal education.

My pappou is generally a man of few words, but the one thing about which he has always had something to say is education. Growing up, the first thing (and sometimes the only thing) he’d ask me about was school. He wanted to know what I was learning, how I was doing, and even the number of hours I spent studying every day. He’d breathe a sigh of relief as I answered his questions, reassured that I cared (almost) as much about my education as he did. “It is the one thing that no one can ever take from you,” he’d say. He would smile wistfully, and I knew then that he was reflecting on his own formal education, which had ended in the second grade. Indeed, that is why he chose to leave Cyprus as an adult and come to the United States. Though his opportunity had passed, he could not bear the thought of his children missing out on school as well. Put simply, Pappou’s dream – the dream that implored him to leave his family, friends, and sense of belonging behind – was an education.

His dream eventually became reality as his son – my father – explored an affinity for the sciences and earned himself a spot in one of the country’s top engineering schools. Despite my father’s passion for engineering, though, he learned early in his career that he ultimately would not be able to progress in the field without an advanced degree, which, at the time, was both a financial and logistical infeasibility. So after just a few years working his dream job, my father returned to help my pappou at the dry cleaners full-time. Whenever I’ve asked him about that decision – whether he missed engineering or regretted it at all – my father has always said the same thing. “I just needed to know that I would be able to send you and your sister to college one day.”

Though I am of course grateful, my father’s sacrifices are also a poignant reminder that in just a single generation, the rules of the game had changed. A college education – heck, even a high school education – was the dream for which Pappou had uprooted his life and though it had seemed unattainable for so long, it had been brought to fruition. However, suddenly and without warning, it was no longer enough. The goalpost had been moved. Now, there was a new dream. That dream was big enough to motivate both father and son at the dry cleaners for twelve hours a day, six days a week, and it is the dream that got me to law school.

In high school and in college, I joined my family at the dry cleaners (part-time, of course, so as not to interfere with my schooling). My work at the cleaners supplemented every unpaid internship in college – a necessary luxury, I was told – and I was eventually able to pursue an advanced degree in large part because of the time I spent sweeping floors and sorting laundry that wasn’t mine. The irony has never been lost on me that the dry cleaners – my pappou’s humble venture – is what has both literally and metaphorically afforded me my education. It symbolizes the sacrifices of so many in my family and has propelled me toward that ever-moving goalpost. Still, as a product of one of the country’s most inequitable public school systems, I know that my
family’s story is triumphant in a way that most are not. The public education system – especially in New York City – was designed for families like mine to succeed. The same cannot be said for many of my peers.

Acting on a deeply internalized reverence for education, I suppose, I spent much of my time in college tutoring, mentoring, and doing anything I could to help the next generation of public school students in New York City. I planned on becoming an educator and spending the remainder of my career at the front of a classroom. Still, despite my efforts – and even those of vast networks of people far more qualified and capable than me – I couldn’t seem to make a system that had given my family everything work the same way for my students. My law school dream was born out of that frustration.

I applied to law school to pursue education law and to promote equity in public education. My ultimate goal is to advocate for the public school students – and their families – who have long been denied the opportunities, resources, and respect that enabled my pappou and subsequently, my father, to dream big. Here in Los Angeles, my work in the community as President of USC Gould’s Public Interest Law Foundation has provided me with the skills, context, and perspective to become a better advocate and to dream even bigger. I have most recently fused my interest in education with my passion for criminal justice reform and I am currently researching the mechanisms that perpetuate the school to prison pipeline not just in New York or Los Angeles, but nationwide. I look forward to advancing legal and policy remedies that will make public schools more equitable, more accessible, and more supportive of those whose dreams of an education have yet to be realized.