

Michael Cebert and Mark Cebert Pro Bono Spotlight

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YLS Pro Bono Committee

Growing up in Hunstville, Alabama, brothers Michael and Mark Cebert were exposed to politics and activism early on and encouraged by their parents and mentors to use their own advocacy skills for the benefit of others. They also quickly discovered that law tended to negatively impact people of color and lower income folks. Michael and Mark decided that if they were going to pursue law, which neither initially had any interest in, they would advocate for these disadvantaged communities.

Mark's activism led him to his current position as Staff Attorney at the Criminal Justice Reform Clinic, an organization he first began working for as a third-year law student. Mark's work has ranged from research and advocacy to client-centered work. For instance, following the groundbreaking *Ramos v. Louisiana* decision, Mark testified in support of Senate Bill 1511 to make the decision retroactive in Oregon. The bill sought to aid defendants, a disproportionate number of whom were people of color, previously found guilty by a non-unanimous jury.

Mark has also researched former Governor Kate Brown's use of clemency and its impacts on pardoned individuals, culminating in him interviewing Governor Brown about the issue. Mark's interest in clemency led him to participate in the Black Oregonian Pardon Project, a project that resulted in nearly

50 individuals receiving pardons for non-expungable felony convictions that allowed them opportunities that were previously unavailable to them. Mark and other participants worked extensively with clients, interviewing and assisting them with the submission of their clemency applications.

Most of Mark's day-to-day work is with clients, primarily incarcerated or previously incarcerated folks who simply want to move forward with their lives. Mark appreciates that pro bono work allows him to advocate for members of communities that are usually overlooked and give a voice to those who cannot advocate for themselves.

Similarly, Michael's desire to help people led him to his current position as a Staff Attorney at Youth, Rights & Justice (YRJ), a nonprofit law firm dedicated exclusively to the representation of children and families. One way Michael assists families is helping them navigate the dependency system, which is triggered when there is a petition alleging abuse brought against a parent. Michael's goal with parent clients is to reunify the parent and child, which commonly requires him to navigate a complex system of working with care providers and service providers, and coordinating service treatment. Michael also assists juveniles with navigating



Michael Cebert



Mark Cebert

the complicated judicial system. Michael and other YRJ staff walk clients through the entire daunting process and ensure that they have zealous advocacy. As with Mark's work, Michael hopes to allow these clients the ability to live a life without the weight of a delinquent act hindering their future.

Given the complex and sensitive nature of dependency work, each case can take months from start to end and have a high emotional toll for everyone involved. Michael understands the impact these cases can have on his clients. Given the history of the dependency system commonly working against people of color, Michael recognizes that this may be the first time his clients see another person of color in his position, and that carries an additional level of significance to what he does. This work is worth it for him when he gets to reunite a child and their parent or help a youth navigate their case and be able to go home. In this vein, Michael suggests that we redefine what it is to "win,"

especially in the pro bono field. Michael is grateful that he is able to help everyday people who are simply interacting with systems that often work against them. He believes that as long as you have the legal knowledge, pro bono work is something that anyone can do. His advice is to appreciate the unique opportunity to interact, connect, and learn from this specific subset of clients who have lessons and views to share that are different from our own.

Without the work of Mark, Michael, the Criminal Justice Reform Clinic, and YRJ, many disadvantaged and disenfranchised individuals and families would not be able to receive the assistance they deserve and the chance of a better future. Thank you, Michael and Mark, for your dedication to pro bono work, and the difference you make in your clients' lives.

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