

A PASSION FOR PRO BONO WORK

Trial attorney preaches the value of giving back

By Greg Hardesty

At a retreat in November 2018 for leaders of the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA), the recently installed president of the board of directors of the nonprofit explained why he's so committed to pro bono work.



James Burgess JD '90 is serving a two-year term as the president of the board of directors at the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles.

James M. Burgess (JD 1990) told his colleagues that in 1994, when he was 32, he found out he was adopted.

“After I told the story, I said, ‘I know that the circumstances of our birth shouldn’t necessarily decide our future,’” says Burgess, a commercial litigation trial lawyer and partner in the Century City office of Sheppard Mullin.

“I was given the benefit of being placed with some great people who gave me enormous opportunities,” Burgess says. “And I feel like I should pay that back by helping other people who are less fortunate and who may, through circumstance of birth, not have enjoyed some of the advantages I had.”

Burgess, elected to the two-year term at LAFLA on July 1, 2018, spent two years at USC Gould after attending law school at George Washington University. When the woman

he eventually would marry accepted a job in California, Burgess followed her.

“I was the last transfer student to be accepted into USC that year [1988], and I was very grateful that they gave me that opportunity,” he says. “It was the time when I probably performed the best as a student. I just loved my time there.”

Raised in a Notre Dame family, Burgess recalls how big of a deal it was when he announced he was becoming a Trojan.

“For my mom,” he says, “it was like, ‘You can turn your back on the church, but don’t turn your back on Notre Dame.’”

Burgess says being raised Catholic — specifically, with the view of putting faith into action — also explains his passion for pro bono work.

And he cites a third reason for providing free legal services to L.A. County’s most vulnerable residents.

“I’m politically more on the conservative side,” Burgess says, “and don’t always think the government is the solution to every problem. And I feel like since I have that view, then I have a responsibility to do something about it myself. I need to be involved.”

There’s another USC connection concerning LAFLA and Burgess’ appointment.

LAFLA, the largest and oldest provider of free legal services to vulnerable, low income individuals in L.A. County, originated from a clinic in a law school building on USC’s campus in 1929.

“We’re trying to get participation up to 30 hours per attorney per year,” Burgess says of pro bono work in his office, where 92 lawyers work. “One of our goals at LAFLA is to make it much easier for attorneys to plug into the foundation and offer their services for people in need of such things as domestic violence restraining orders and eviction defense.”

Adds Burgess, a father of four daughters: “I’ve always been a person who advocates for other people, even going back to high school. I’ve always said I’m a better advocate for other people than I am for myself.” 📌