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Get to Know Michelle Johnson



LEGAL AID AND DEFENDER
ASSOCIATION INCORPORATED

MICHELLE JOHNSON
President and CEO



President and CEO of LADA

By Sheila Pursglove
Legal News

What would surprise people about your job?

A lot of what we do at the Legal Aid and Defender Association (LADA)—and this is true for most legal aid organizations—happens outside the courtroom. Many clients reach out in desperation for issues that require systemic knowledge, communication, and negotiation, rather than litigation. We have a network of community agencies outside of the legal system that we work with to consider all options that may help the client resolve their legal issue and to ensure their rights are protected.

What is something most people—including attorneys—don't know about free legal aid?

While most people know that legal aid supports low-income residents and helps level the playing field in our justice system, they may not realize the practical benefits it provides to the legal system itself. Without representation, many individuals attempt self-representation, which can be inefficient, burdens the courts, and strains social services. Legal aid alleviates these bottlenecks, ensuring smoother processes for everyone involved. Many also may not know the various types of cases in which legal aid provides legal assistance, including protecting housing and homeownership and protecting education rights.

Why did you become a lawyer?

My interest in law goes back to high school. I was interested in understanding how laws work together and impact society. I enjoyed law-based classes before law school that gave me the opportunity to think, analyze and consider opposing viewpoints. During my legal career, I have particularly had the desire to be a voice for those who are often unheard.

Who are your law role models?

I have had several lawyers that I have looked up to over time. Some were notable and widely recognized, some were not. I think the lawyers that I have most admired, are those who are knowledgeable and willing to share and mentor others; who demonstrate respect for others including all parties, the judicial system and the law; and who wanted to leave their slice of the world better than they found it.

What is your advice to someone considering law school?

I would advise anyone interested in law school to volunteer at a law office or legal aid office to see firsthand what law practice is like and not select law because of what you see on television. Second, I would say to figure out what you are looking for in a legal career and talk to attorneys who practice in that area to see if their experience aligns with that. Lastly, regardless of what path or legal area you choose, remember to find ways to give back.

What's the best advice anyone has ever given you?

I think the best advice that I have received, in law, and in life are similar. I had a law professor that would always ask "What's your legal authority for that?" That resonates with me today, to always keep in mind to have legal authority for a position. In life, it is to "Start with Why". I believe both of these are mirror statements that really boil down to having an understanding of your position and goal.

What kinds of cases does LADA advocate for?

LADA handles most civil justice cases except for workers' compensation, and fee-generating cases like personal injury or medical malpractice, where attorneys are typically compensated through settlements or verdicts. One challenge we face is that some attorneys and law firms are reluctant to volunteer to provide pro bono representation because these areas of law might not align with their specialties. However, much of what we practice can be taught relatively easily. Legal aid is an excellent opportunity for new attorneys and law students to gain experience.

What are the benefits of volunteering at a legal aid organization?

For new attorneys and law students, volunteering offers practical, hands-on experience with client interactions and navigating the legal system, while building confidence. For law firms, it fulfills pro bono service guidelines, fosters a culture of giving back, and boosts staff morale. For law students, it can also provide academic credits. Most attorneys enter the profession with a deep belief in justice, and volunteering through legal aid ensures that justice is accessible to everyone. The internal rewards and the impact on the lives of our clients are immeasurable.

What is your motto?

I can't think of a better motto than LADA's mission: To provide holistic, innovative legal services that improve the quality of life and empower vulnerable and underserved individuals, families, and communities.

What is the most difficult part of your job?

The hardest part is turning people away. Each year, thousands of individuals in Metro Detroit need legal assistance but go unrepresented due to limited resources. While we rely heavily on our generous funders and donors, often grants and donations are restricted to specific legal activities or geographic areas. Unrestricted funds allow us the flexibility to respond to emergent legal needs in the community thereby enabling us to help more people and better serve those in need.