M aria L. Remillard
Partner, Bowditch & Dewey, Worcester
Suffolk University Law School

“I’m able to tell [clients] I’ve been where they are, and there’s a light at the end of the tunnel.”

Years before Maria L. Remillard became an attorney, she was a young, single mother struggling to get by on public assistance and the rare child-support check.

Determined to make a better life, she worked through college and law school as a waitress and bartender, with customers quizzing her on her coursework during shifts.

Today, she’s a partner at Bowditch & Dewey with a thriving practice, but she’s never forgotten where she came from.

That’s why in addition to handling complex probate and fiduciary disputes for well-heeled private clients — including two she litigated at the Supreme Judicial Court — Remillard maintains a busy pro bono practice advocating in Probate Court for cash-strapped clients with struggles similar to those she once faced.

“I’m able to tell them I’ve been where they are, and there’s a light at the end of the tunnel,” Remillard says. “Not only do they believe I have their back but that things can get better.”

Remillard does all that while dealing with an autoimmune disease that causes her chronic pain and fatigue and frequent loss of cranial and joint function. Her firm gives her the flexibility to work at home as needed, which enables her to manage both her condition and her caseload. At the same time, she says the disease has made her a better attorney because it gives her a level of empathy others may not have.

“I look like a very healthy individual, and at times I am, but at other times people may not realize that every single movement is excruciating,” she says. “That makes me realize that if someone else is having a particularly bad day, whether it’s opposing counsel or a client, I’ll be one of the first people to extend a deadline or a common courtesy.”

— Eric T. Berkman

A nna S. Richardson
Co-Executive Director, Veterans Legal Services, Boston
Boston University School of Law

“(S)omeone who had lived in poverty his entire life . . . now had the financial resources and health benefits he could never access before.”

As a second-year law student, Anna S. Richardson was in a relationship with a Marine who’d been wounded in Afghanistan. As he was leaving the military, issues arose over his disability rating and the benefits he could receive. With her limited legal knowledge, Richardson helped him obtain medical retirement instead of a one-time severance payment. She also saw firsthand the challenges veterans face transitioning home.

The relationship ended, but Richardson’s commitment to helping veterans with their legal needs continued. After graduation, she went to work for Veterans Legal Services, at the time a shoestring operation housed in a tiny, borrowed space at Boston College Law School and staffed mostly by students.

A decade later, under the leadership of Richardson and co-executive director Sarah Rosburgh, VLS has multiple staff attorneys, a sizeable annual budget, offices in Boston with satellite locations across the state and an army of volunteer attorneys to assist veterans on a pro bono basis.

Asked about a case she’s particularly proud of, Richardson describes helping a black World War II-era veteran access federal benefits he had been denied for decades. While serving on active duty in Georgia, the man suffered a brain injury during a racially motivated attack. Military doctors, instead of taking down a thorough medical report, ordered him to rest in the barracks in an apparent effort to sweep the incident under the rug.

“So there was very limited evidence available to prove the injury was related to his service,” Richardson says.

Still, through a painstaking analysis of the few records available, which were more than 70 years old and written in foul language, Richardson successfully made a case for him, an accomplishment she finds particularly satisfying.

“This is someone who had lived in poverty his entire life and now had the financial resources and health benefits he could never access before,” she says. “It highlighted for me how a lawyer can dramatically change somebody’s life.”

— Eric T. Berkman

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