



Equal Justice Coalition

Walk to the Hill 2013

Remarks of Daniele Bien-Aimé, former legal aid client – January 30, 2013

Good morning and thank you for inviting me. My name is Daniele Bien-Aimé.

On April 12th, 2011, I felt a lump in my breast. I had just buried my mother the day before after her own battle with cancer, and it seemed impossible that God would do this to me after all I'd been through. For almost two years I had struggled to take care of my mother while raising two daughters of my own and working full time. But my worst fears were soon realized: my doctor said I had breast cancer and needed a double mastectomy, chemo and radiation.

I can't tell you how hard those days were, but I had to go on. I took time off from my job as a medical interpreter to recover from the surgery and begin treatment. The chemo was making me sick, and I needed to take care of myself and my daughters. I knew the Family Medical Leave Act gave me six weeks, and when that time was almost up, I told my employer I was ready to come back to work. But they told me that was impossible, since I had no sick time left and I would obviously need some time off to get my chemo treatments. So, they fired me.

Now I had no job, which meant no income and no health insurance. I wasn't eligible for MassHealth, even though I was a legal permanent resident, because you had to have lived in the country for at least five years to be eligible, and I hadn't. After I lost my insurance, the hospital actually turned me away from my chemo treatment because I couldn't pay for it. And when it seemed like things couldn't get any worse, my landlord sent an eviction notice.

But this is where my story starts to change. My neighborhood health center referred me to South Coastal Counties Legal Services and an attorney there, Weayonnoh Nelson-Davies, took my case. The work they did for me literally saved my life. First Weayonnoh wrote to my employer explaining my rights to reasonable accommodation, and when that didn't work she tried negotiating and finally threatened to sue. I got my job and my health insurance back, and I was able to continue my treatment. When I developed an infection and had to have more surgery four months later, it was covered. I often wonder what would have happened then if I didn't have insurance.

Weayonnoh also kept me and my girls in our home. Some of my relatives pitched in to help pay my back rent and Weayonnoh convinced my landlord to accept partial payment and set up a payment plan until things settled down.

Finally, legal aid helped with my immigration status.

Today, my cancer is gone, hopefully never to return, I'm back to work full time, my daughters and I are in our home, I have health insurance, my life is returning to normal, and I'm an American citizen.

Cancer has opened my eyes to many things. It gave me insight into true friendship and the importance of family. It taught me that I need to know my rights and it made me aware of how important it is to have legal help when you need it.

So I thank legal aid for all they did for me, and I thank you all for being here today to support them. To me, Weayonnoh was heaven sent, but sometimes heaven needs a little help from the government! So thank you all from the bottom of my heart for taking the time to talk to your legislators so that legal aid can keep helping people like me.