

Volunteer Attorney: Susan Gramling

Before becoming an attorney, Susan Gramling spent 20 years as a speech pathologist. After working at a non-profit agency serving deaf and hard of hearing clients and their families, Susan decided a law degree would make her a better advocate for people with disabilities. Susan volunteers at the Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinic because she believes it is important for law students to practice effective communication with clients and loves the enthusiasm students bring to the practice of law. She also thinks it is important for lawyers and students to recognize that they don't have all the answers to client's problems and they must learn when to refer clients somewhere else in the community. After many years of practice, Susan is stepping away from legal practice and spending more time in mediation. When she has spare time, Susan spends time with her extended family and enjoys trying new restaurants, going to movies, walking, camping, and fishing.

Describe your education leading up to law school.

I was originally trained as a speech pathologist (undergrad at Marquette University; graduate school at UWM) and took subsequent administrative leadership courses at UWM

Why did you decide to go to law school and become an attorney?

After practicing as a speech pathologist for about 20 years, I became the executive director of a non-profit agency serving deaf and hard of hearing clients and their families. For six years in that role, I was part of a statewide group that advocated for disability issues such as the telecommunication relay system (now in full force including video relay to accommodate sign language communication), the implementation of the American's With Disabilities Act, and the federal and state special education laws and practices. I became more of an advocate and decided that a law degree would enhance my ability to impact various systems that work with people with disabilities.

Why do you volunteer at the MVLC?

I think it is very important that law students have practice, not only in the theory of law, but also in relating to and with real people. Effective communication skills are, in my opinion, just as important as the legal skills that lawyers bring to the community. Also, I think it is okay for students to learn that attorneys do not have all of the answers and that it is okay to identify the need for more inquiry or to refer clients to community based services.

From my personal point of view, it keeps me in touch with real people with real problems.

Why do you think pro bono work is important?

For the simple reason that many people cannot afford to see a lawyer or don't know how to hire a lawyer. In this case, the legal clinic allows for both of those needs to be satisfied to the extent possible.

Has your experience volunteering at the MVLC enriched your practice as an attorney? If so, how?

I have learned about other areas of law and at least can recognize who might be a good referral when I don't know something. It is also great to experience the enthusiasm of the law students, generally brand new to the field! It keeps me going and helps me remember what I do is important.

Do you have any tips for how to juggle pro bono work with a busy work schedule?

I think it is a matter of priorities and like anything else, once you commit to a reasonable amount of time, you stick with it and it becomes routine.

What do you like to do in your spare time? Do you have any hobbies or interests?

I love spending time with my extended family, going to new restaurants, movies, walking, camping, and fishing.

Is there anything else we should know about you?

I live in Milwaukee's Washington Heights neighborhood and enjoy the benefits of living in the city. At this point in my life, I am stepping out of formal legal practice and devoting my time to mediation.