SOCIAL JUSTICE HIGHLIGHT

By: Jasmine F. Robinson

As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest.
   – Nelson Mandela

Hate. Intolerance. Injustice. Who will bring justice to families who lost loved ones to acts of violence committed by hate groups? Who will advocate for medical care for prisoners with mental health issues? Who will challenge gay-to-straight conversion therapy as consumer fraud? Who will advocate for children’s rights in school? Who will challenge financial predatory practices that trap the poor in a cycle of debt? The instances of injustice plague our society. The good is someone is fighting .The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has been fighting hate and seeking justice for society’s most vulnerable since 1971.

The SPLC is headquartered in Montgomery, Alabama, and has state offices in Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi. The SPLC’s foundation is rooted in hate group work—suing and bankrupting white supremacist groups and getting justice for families of people hurt by those groups. Today, the SPLC addresses issues divided into five practice groups: (1) Children’s Rights, (2) Immigrant Justice, (3) LGBT Rights, (4) Economic Justice, and (5) Criminal Justice Reform. Each practice group encompasses advocacy work and litigation. Each local office also collaborates with different advocacy organizations such as the ACLU, Human Rights Campaign, Disability Rights, and community coalitions.

The SPLC gives their clients and communities a voice and an opportunity to be heard. Particularly, African Americans, Latinos, and the poor are most affected by the SPLC’s work. Ebony Howard, SPLC Associate Legal Director, is particularly proud of a class action brought on behalf of Birmingham, AL students against the Birmingham Police Department and Birmingham Board of Education. In a school where 90% of students are African American and the majority qualify for free or reduced meals, Birmingham Police Officers sprayed mace on students as a form of discipline to deal with normal, adolescent behavior. A federal judge ruled that Birmingham police violated the students’ constitutional rights by using excessive force for minor discipline problems. This case is on appeal, but is particularly important to Ms. Howard because many of the students did not know it was inappropriate and wrong to be sprayed with chemical spray at school and “their clients felt empowered for the first time in their life.”

Similarly, SPLC Senior Attorney, Elissa Johnson, has worked on an ongoing class action suit against the Department of Corrections in east Mississippi. The litigation arises out of deplorable conditions at the East Mississippi Correctional Facility - the state’s primary facility for inmates with mental illnesses. In addition to the deplorable conditions, inmates received substandard or no medical treatment. This case is an example of the major work the SPLC does to ensure that prisoners are not subjected to unconstitutional, inhumane conditions and that they receive proper medical and mental health care.
The work of the SPLC is vast and there are many ways young lawyers from all over the nation can assist. First, attorneys can sign up to receive referrals from the SPLC to assist clients on issues and cases the SPLC cannot accept. Attorneys interested in receiving referrals can visit splicenter.org/contact-us, select “general inquiry” and indicate they are interested in referrals. Second, the SPLC works with many community groups that need attorneys to serve as members of boards, advise them and offer legal expertise. Contact your local community groups to see if your legal expertise can be of assistance to the group. Finally, attorneys can support the SPLC through its social media (Facebook, Twitter, SPLC Website, etc.) by sharing the SPLC’s posts and news. The issues the SPLC address are present in all communities. Following and sharing the SPLC’s social media posts will bring light to the issues and help other lawyers whose work encompass fighting social injustices.

You can read about the cases cited at the following links:


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