



Celebrating Success: A Story from MLP Pro Bono Guardianship

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This story is about a recent client of mine, a Snohomish County grandmother who came to MLP looking for assistance in obtaining guardianship of her grandson. Helping this grandmother and her grandson was an incredibly rewarding experience for me and reaffirmed my passion for volunteering for MLP.

My client had long been the sole legal custodian of her grandson. Shortly after her grandson was born, his parents lost custody and my client stepped in. She also stepped in as sole custodian for her daughter's two other children. These children also have special needs and will likely need guardianships as they approach adulthood. As you can see, my client is a truly remarkable woman who has tirelessly spent many years of her life raising and caring for children with special needs.

By way of background, I try to make the process of petitioning for guardianship as easy and convenient as possible for my clients. This means I like to arrange to meet them and the alleged incapacitated person – known as the “AIP” – for the intake interview somewhere close to their home or work, and preferably in their home. I believe the familiarity of the home environment helps the client be at ease with me and allows me to get to know the client and the AIP much better than I would have were I to meet them in a coffee shop or office conference room. It's nice, too, because it gives me a chance to confirm – for myself – that my client, who is the proposed guardian – will indeed make a good guardian. I can look around and answer such questions as: Is the house clean? Does it look like a happy place? How does my client address and act towards the AIP? While I realize these questions and overall assessment are ultimately within the province of the guardian ad litem, and that they are much better suited to make this assessment, I nonetheless believe I have an independent duty to make this assessment as I have agreed to represent the petitioning guardian as my client.

Here, I met with the grandmother and her grandson – we will call him John – at their home in Lake Stevens. John showed me his bedroom and his big movie collection, and he told me how much he was looking forward to his 18th birthday. Because I like to put the AIP at ease and help them prepare for the “big day” in court, I talked with John a little bit about the guardianship process and explained what would happen the day we went to court.

While this case was a little more complicated than others, namely because John's mother or father could reappear at any moment and contest the guardianship proceeding, thankfully it ended up being relatively smooth sailing to get my client appointed as guardian.

Both Grandma and Grandson were extremely thankful and appreciative of me throughout the guardianship process. As I mentioned before, my client leads a pretty hectic life, taking care of her grandchildren full-time as their sole custodian. Because of this, I derived a lot satisfaction from the fact that I was able to make the guardianship process as easy on her as possible by, among other things, driving up to meet her in Snohomish County instead of requiring her to meet me down in Seattle.

I enjoy working on guardianship cases with MLP because they get me out of my comfort zone and expose me to experiences I would not otherwise have. I am a health care regulatory compliance lawyer by trade which means I never have the opportunity to go to the courthouse and present a case in front of a judge. This also means, for the most part, I don't get the chance to work with a client where the work I do will meaningfully impact their life on a personal level.

In addition to these rewarding interactions with my MLP clients, I also recognize how a guardianship order and the accompanying letters of guardianship are beneficial to the clients I service on a day-to-day basis, that is, the hospitals, clinics, and other medical providers I work with as a health care lawyer. For example, without the letter of guardianship, a health care provider may be unsure of who can make important health care decisions. A guardianship order very clearly settles this uncertainty for the health care team.

Guardianship is also a matter that is particularly close to my heart. My uncle has severe developmental disabilities and my aunt and mother have long served as his guardian and stand-by guardian. I know that this legal process had given my grandmother peace of mind that my uncle would be taken care of after she was gone because this process ensures that the right people have power to make decisions on his behalf. In the absence of guardianship protections, we worried he could be taken advantage of.

Thank you to MLP for giving me this fulfilling opportunity to make a difference and to serve my community.