

11-2018

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## Recommended Citation

Steinbach, Tirien, "Sitting in the Front of the Bus: Belonging at the East Bay Community Law Center" (2018). Volume 9, CLR Online. <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38W950N78>

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# Sitting in the Front of the Bus: Belonging at the East Bay Community Law Center

Tirien Steinbach\*

It was a weekday afternoon, and my last meeting of the day was a community forum in Oakland hosted by Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson to discuss African American achievement. The convening was at an Oakland high school that was not on a BART line. But rather than drive, I decided to take the bus. AC Transit buses were my primary form of transportation in my youth, taking me to and from school and out and about with my friends. I was reminded of those days as I boarded the bus, looking around at the eclectic mix of old and young, Black and brown and white students, workers, shoppers, retirees. I smiled to myself seeing the group of teenagers in the back seats with their backpacks full of books, taking up space and making noise, practically bursting with bottled-up energy after a day spent in tightly regulated classrooms. I remembered that feeling: when the bus meant freedom.

That day, I sat nearer to the front with the older folks, feeling like a grown-up in my gray suit. An elderly African American gentleman boarded the bus and sat in the seat across from the driver, chatting amiably with people near him and greeting passengers with a nod or smile. In his sharp cap and coat, he reminded me of my grandfather.

The bus route took us past the original storefront of the East Bay Community Law Center (EBCLC) offices on Shattuck and Woolsey, where our Economic Security & Opportunity clinics operated before moving last December. Reflexively, I looked over at the office with the EBCLC name, colorful logo, and tag line, “justice through education and advocacy,” painted across the windows.

As we rolled past, the older gentleman pointed out the window to EBCLC and said to the driver and other passengers generally, “You know that place? The law center? If you need a lawyer, that’s the place to go for help.”

Of course, my ears perked up, and I leaned forward to hear more.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38W950N78>

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The bus driver asked, “Yeah? What do they help with?”

The gentleman said, “I got help with some credit card problem I had, but they help with all kinds of legal issues: housing, benefits, cars, jobs. . . .”

A passenger joined in, “Really? Does it cost a lot?”

The older gentleman replied, “No, it’s all free! And let me tell you, they treat you right. At that law center, they treat you with respect. I had this lawyer and these students from the university that worked with me for as long as it took to take care of the problem.”

Another passenger joined in, asking how to get help at EBCLC, and the older gentleman told her, “You can just walk in or call and leave a message. They’ll get back to you. They really helped me out of a bad spot.”

I could not contain the deep gratitude I felt overhearing this conversation, and it bubbled up into a broad smile and tears in my eyes. I reached into my bag and pulled out my business card, and at the next stop, I moved up to the front to sit next to the older gentleman.

I said, “Sir, I overheard what you said, and I had to tell you: I am the director of the law center,” and I handed him my card.

He looked down at the card and back up at me, saying, “*You* are the director?” with a mixture of surprise and delight.

I was reminded that in a state where about eighty percent of the lawyers are white,<sup>1</sup> people are often surprised that I, a multiracial Black woman, am a lawyer, let alone an executive director of a law center.

I replied with a smile, “Yes! I am the director, and I just wanted to say I appreciate you spreading the good word about the law center. I am so glad to hear that we were able to help you.”

The gentleman turned to the other passengers and driver and declared loudly and proudly, “This young woman is the director of the law center!” pointing to me as if he had magically pulled me out of a hat.

I nodded and grinned, as other riders looked at me with wide eyes and surprised smiles. Several people asked for my card, and I passed them around.

For the rest of the bus ride, the gentleman and I chatted. He told me about the lawyers and law students who had helped him and asked me about myself. I told him I had grown up in Oakland and Berkeley and that I was proud to work in the community that raised me.

Law professor John A. Powell writes extensively about the phenomenon of “othering,” calling it *the* problem of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> He describes othering as “a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human

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1. *Predominantly White Male State Bar Changing . . . Slowly*, CAL. BAR J. (Jan. 2012), <http://www.calbarjournal.com/January2012/TopHeadlines/TH1.aspx> [https://perma.cc/VW2M-FG72].

2. John A. Powell & Stephen Menendian, *The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging*, OTHERING & BELONGING, Summer 2016, at 14.

differences based on group identities.”<sup>3</sup> Professor Powell explains that “othering” encompasses personal, interpersonal, structural, and societal causes of culturally-based inequality.<sup>4</sup> Within Professor Powell’s frame, the opposite of othering is, not “saming,” but belonging, and belonging means being held within the “circle of human concern” and, therefore, afforded the care and protection of the law.<sup>5</sup>

At EBCLC, our goal is not only to provide excellent legal services and law training but also to create a sense of belonging—to expand the circle of human concern for our clients, our students, and our community. In our teaching and service, we strive to address the bias and bigotry within our laws, our legal institutions, and ourselves. Only through acknowledging and directly addressing issues of power, privilege, cultural inequity, and exclusion can we begin to use our legal advocacy skills to build a truly just, inclusive, and equitable society. We do this in our clinical program through recruiting a diverse group of students, training early and often about cultural equity, and bringing a racial and economic justice frame to our work. EBCLC challenges inequity through our research, legislative advocacy, and impact litigation that calls out explicit and implicit bias in our laws, policies, and practices. EBCLC also expands the circle of human concern and the care and protection of the law through the legal services—the information, counseling, and representation—that we provide directly to individuals in our community. As important as *what* legal assistance we can provide is *how* EBCLC staff and students provide those services—how we treat our clients and engage with our community.

That day on the bus, I experienced “belonging” in the way that Professor Powell so eloquently describes in his work on othering and belonging. From the gentleman who received help from EBCLC, I understood clearly the importance of our assistance and that he was treated with genuine respect, consideration, and kindness by our lawyers and law students, people working within the legal system. For me, I felt deeply connected to my beloved community and a profound sense of being “tied in a single garment of destiny” and “in an inescapable network of mutuality,” as described by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>6</sup> This is the aspiration and work, the heart and soul, of community law practice.

As I got ready to exit the bus that day, the older gentleman took my hand and said, “Thank you for what you do to help people.” Then with a sly wink, he asked, “Now, tell me, if I had been saying something bad about the law center would you have come up to talk to me?”

I laughed and replied, “Yes, because I would want to know what went wrong and how we could do better.” And with a wink back to him I said, “But it might not have been as much of a pleasure as it was to talk to you today.”

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3. *Id.* at 17.

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.* at 32–34.

6. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter From a Birmingham Jail* (Apr. 16, 1963).

He laughed and squeezed my hand one last time before I stepped down through the doors, waving to him and the other passengers as the bus pulled away.