

Rudy Alejo  
2011 Sax Prize Winner Speech

Thank you all for coming today to share this amazing honor with me. Having worked closely with many people in this room for quite some time now, I can think of more than a few of you who should be up here today.

I would like to thank the Sax family, the Prize Committee, and the Law School for continuing such a wonderful tradition and for being so committed to the many benefits a clinical education entails, both for us the advocates and for our clients.

I would like to thank my family; you are all very special to me.

I would like especially to thank my wife, Renee. Thank you for supporting me as a mostly unemployed and chronically overwhelmed student for all these years. You are a saint, and anyone who knows me knows that I could not be here today without your love and support.

Last, I would like to thank everyone at the East Bay Community Law Center – all of the amazing attorneys and advocates, as well as the wonderful support staff. You have all been like a family to me for the past year and a half. You have inspired me to no small degree, and I have constantly fed off your passion for justice and your commitment to clients. And although our time together is approaching its end, I take comfort in the fact that so many of you will be my lifelong friends.

When I first came to EBCLC, I had just undergone one of the most trying and unpleasant experiences of my life: three semesters of law school. Like many people suffering from this condition, I wondered what had happened to me and whether I would ever be able to recover. I had come to law school with so many dreams and desires, both lofty and grounded. Faced with our famous course load, however, I felt like I had to set many of these aside to focus on things that, no offense to the lawyers in the room, were never very important to me. Fortunately, when I arrived at EBCLC, I quickly rediscovered the reasons I came to law school.

My first day in the Clean Slate Practice was spent observing Jessie Warner as she provided direct services to clients at our Hayward intake clinic. One of our clients was a man whose thirty-year-old conviction was threatening to prevent him from acting as an in-home support provider for his ailing wife. The client explained to us that he had made a mistake as a teenager – something that I could certainly relate to – but that he had done everything he could think of to move on from his past. He had stayed out of trouble completely, and he had founded and operated a small business for decades, only to retire when his wife's illness had become too great for her to bear alone. This client had done all that society had asked of him, yet his promise of redemption remained unfulfilled.

I listened with excitement as Jessie explained what we could do for the client, and that she and advocates from around the state were fighting to change these absurd policies.

Jessie's efforts paid off, and a short time later I was able to call this client to let him know that he would be able to care for his wife.

The passion I saw my first day inspired me, and the injustice I learned of that first day made me really, really angry.

Before coming to Clean Slate, I had never worked with clients in an up-close, intensely personal kind of way. After only a few weeks I began conducting declaration interviews, and I found each one of these to be an emotionally-trying, eye-opening experience. During these interviews, I heard stories of great personal tragedy often followed by great personal triumph. I heard stories of poverty and desperation, violence and abuse. And I was confronted with situations that law school simply can't prepare you for, like what to say when a client tells you she turned to drugs to cope with the murder of her children, or when another client tells you she sold herself to buy diapers for her newborn. After hearing the same things over and over again, I came to understand that these are the true stories of our clients, stories that an employer will never learn simply by reviewing a person's background check.

Our clients in the Clean Slate Practice continually face unimaginable barriers, both systemic and otherwise. Their perseverance and unyielding strength has been a great source of inspiration to me. I often find myself thinking of them whenever I begin to complain about the difficulties of law school, not that their stories have cured this tendency completely.

And working with the amazing attorneys in Clean Slate allowed me the opportunity to discover the kind of lawyer I hope to be. The relationship between attorney and advocate at EBCLC is one of openness, approachability, and a degree of patience one usually finds only in a monastery.

During my first semester, the supervision was intense. I had scheduled meetings with Jesse Hsieh each week, but he would usually tolerate my hovering outside his cubicle several times a day whenever I needed his reassurance. He guided me in my research and was always quick to refocus me when I became lost in some tangential issue. In our weekly meetings Jesse pointed out both my talents as well as my shortcomings, and he spent countless hours with me cultivating the former while helping me to find ways to overcome the latter.

As the months progressed, I was given increased responsibility and increased freedom. With these, I experienced an increase in self-doubt. I remember lobbying Jessie Warner and Jesse Hsieh for months to let me negotiate on behalf of a client in his claim against a background check company. Finally they caved in, and I was given the client's file. When my opposing counsel turned out to be the industry expert, however, I assured them that I would certainly understand if they wanted to take over the case, that there would be absolutely no hard feelings. They insisted that I go forward as planned, and I benefitted from this experience greatly. Time and time again they had faith in me when I doubted myself, and I am forever grateful to them.

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And in Eliza Hersh, I found a true mentor and a true friend. No matter what I worked on with her, Eliza's central goal, it seemed, was to ensure that I got something out of the deal – that I became a better writer, a better advocate, a better person. She is always quick to say that she lacks a filter, and having spent thirteen hours in a car with her on our way to see a client in prison, I think she may be right. While some may find this intimidating, I found Eliza's honesty to be extremely comforting, even if it did occasionally cause my cheeks to redden. I knew that whatever she said needed to be considered, and considered seriously. If I can be only half the attorney she is, I know that I will do right by my clients.

In closing, I want again to thank everyone at the Law Center for making this past year and a half the most pleasant, productive part of my life thus far. Most importantly, I want to thank the dozens of clients I have had the pleasure of working with; through you, I have discovered so much about who I am and who I hope to become. Thank you.