

Grillo Retreat: Daunting Challenges, Worthy Examples

By Ida Bostian Teaching Scholar

Center for Social Justice and Public Service, Santa Clara University School of Law

Snow! That was the first item on everyone's lips at this year's Trina Grillo Law Retreat. Indeed, the forces of nature contrived to make this year's gathering a true *retreat*, with the snow causing road hazards and highway closures in and around Santa Cruz. Undaunted, Retreat participants braved the elements, marveled at the truly persistent surfers visible through the windows, and got down to business. Literally.

"What does money have to do with social justice lawyering?" That was the second item for discussion, and it easily kept us busy for the rest of the weekend. Exploring topics as wide-ranging as personal finances, the business of social justice law, and the economic needs of our clients, speakers and panelists made an intimidating and potentially cold topic interesting, accessible, and downright human. For example, several speakers reminded us that, often due to personal financial issues, there are many different avenues for social justice and public interest lawyers to follow. From private practice to government to academics to public interest and social justice organizations, and sometimes back again: so long as you keep the goals of public interest and social justice in mind, you are still part of the fight.

Others spoke of the need for social justice and public interest organizations to diversify funding sources, advising these organizations to seek funds when available, such as through grants and court-awarded attorney's fees. Many speakers also observed that, given the conservative nature of today's courts, individuals and organizations should consider non-litigation strategies to serve their clients. In conjunction with this advice, several panelists advised participants that dollars will go further when we get to know our clients and their needs, rather than assuming that we know their needs because "we're the lawyers."

Emerging from these ideas, a theme throughout the Retreat was an appeal for social justice lawyers to recognize current business, financial, and political realities, even as we seek to transform those realities. For example, as James Head reminded us in this year's Ralph Santiago Abascal Memorial Address, one goal of social justice and public interest lawyering should be to help the individuals and communities we serve achieve economic self-sufficiency, such that they will not always need our services. At the same time, we must continue to confront those public policies and private interests that seek to prevent wealth accumulation by these communities. This is—to say the least—a daunting task. In an era when it seems that we are struggling to keep any semblance of the "safety net" intact, how can we *both* continue that struggle *and* seek to empower individuals and communities such that the safety net can be smaller in the future?

In her After Dinner Address, Bernida Reagan spoke of "the 3Cs"—Commitment, Creativity, and Courage. She spoke in the context of her community development work in the Bay Area, but "the 3Cs" have broader application for us all. Indeed, it will take all three traits to protect the least vulnerable amongst us, while we also seek to reduce that vulnerability. Fortunately, the Grillo Retreat helps us to cultivate these traits, to see and emulate the courage and creativity in our colleagues, and to commit to this work over the long haul.

I only know Trina Grillo through those who knew and loved her. However, as we were reminded at the beginning of the Retreat, Grillo implored us to never back down from a struggle, to listen for those who have not yet spoken, and to continue difficult work even in extraordinarily difficult times. A worthy example of “the 3 Cs” in action, I believe that she would not shy away from the challenges facing social justice and public interest lawyers today. And by seeking to follow in her footsteps, I believe that the way to traverse this long and tricky path will be made clear.