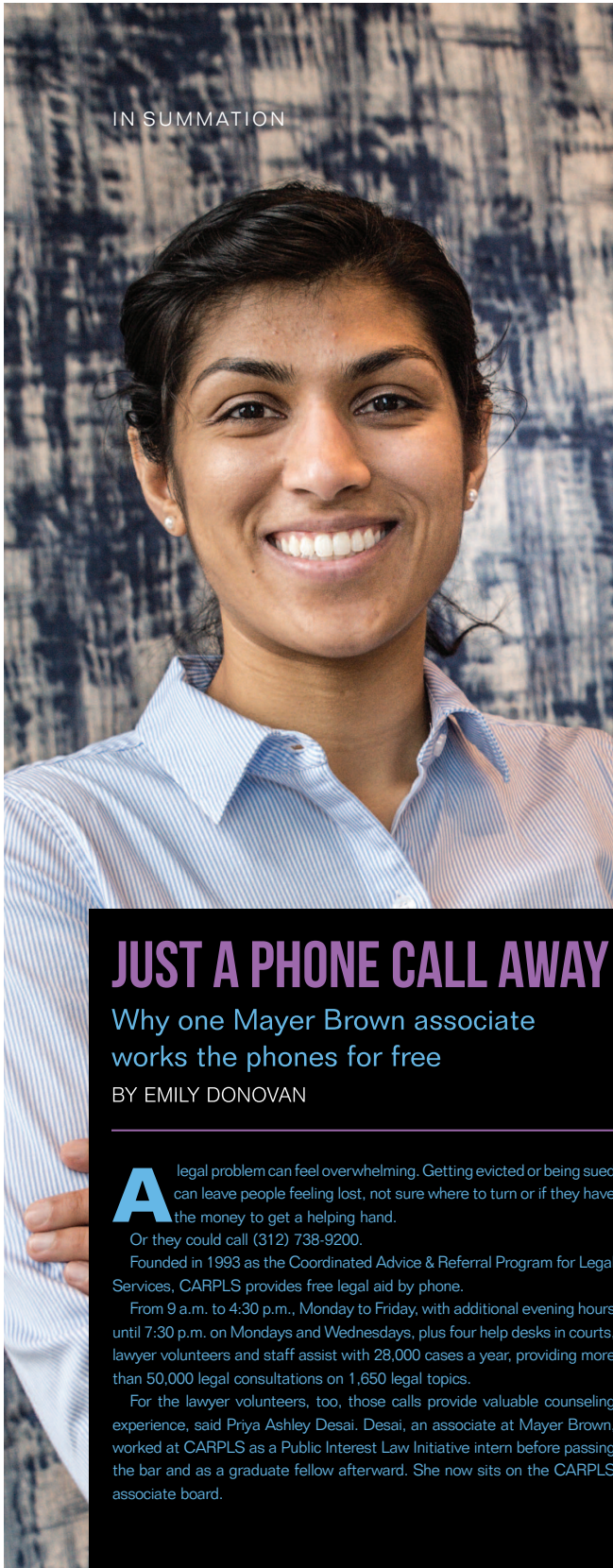


CHICAGO LAWYER®



IN SUMMATION

JUST A PHONE CALL AWAY

Why one Mayer Brown associate works the phones for free

BY EMILY DONOVAN

A legal problem can feel overwhelming. Getting evicted or being sued can leave people feeling lost, not sure where to turn or if they have the money to get a helping hand.

Or they could call (312) 738-9200.

Founded in 1993 as the Coordinated Advice & Referral Program for Legal Services, CARPLS provides free legal aid by phone.

From 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday to Friday, with additional evening hours until 7:30 p.m. on Mondays and Wednesdays, plus four help desks in courts, lawyer volunteers and staff assist with 28,000 cases a year, providing more than 50,000 legal consultations on 1,650 legal topics.

For the lawyer volunteers, too, those calls provide valuable counseling experience, said Priya Ashley Desai. Desai, an associate at Mayer Brown, worked at CARPLS as a Public Interest Law Initiative intern before passing the bar and as a graduate fellow afterward. She now sits on the CARPLS associate board.

Volunteers are trained in family law, consumer law and housing law and work in four-hour volunteer shifts. Some clients only need about half an hour per call while others may need almost all four hours to work through their issue and then may call back on another day for another volunteer to pick up where the first one left off.

CL: What is a typical phone call like?

Desai: From the beginning of the conversation, when you say, "CARPLS gives free legal advice," that's what catches a lot of people off guard. They say, "It's free? You're not just going to refer me to somebody else and tell me I don't have a problem?"

They respect you and are grateful that they have someone to talk to.

Every so often, you'll get someone who just starts crying or they're just so grateful that they don't know what to do. Like, "Thank you so much. Can I send you a card? Can I pay you somehow?" And you're like, "Well, no. We're free legal advice. If you'd like to make a donation, you can go to our website and do that — but pay your rent first."

CL: Why did you choose CARPLS to work with and volunteer for?

Desai: I did some research about the hotline and I thought it was one of the organizations that touched the most people. What struck me about CARPLS was that it really is kind of like going to the library. You can actually find your answer there.

CL: What skills have you gained from volunteering with the hotline?

Desai: A lot of it is just about being a receptive listener. People think that nine different things are happening to them at one time, so they'll call and say, "I'm getting evicted, I lost my job because I was pregnant and I know that's illegal but I don't have any money to do anything about that, and my kids got taken away from me and I'm owed child support."

You kind of have to piecemeal what they said to you and turn it into, "This is one issue; let's deal with that now. This is the next issue, tell me more about that and then let's see if that's a separate legal issue that we can open another service for."

It's kind of like being a PI. You have to go back and figure out what exactly happened to begin with.

We get clients whose intelligence levels are high but their education levels are low. We get people who have mental handicaps, we sometimes get children calling or elderly individuals who can't really hear or can't really process what you're telling them.

One of the hardest thing about being a volunteer is learning to communicate, but it's also one of the best skills that a lawyer can develop. I'm learning that even at a big law firm, clients don't know how to communicate with you oftentimes.

CL: Do you actually use those skills in your practice or in your personal life?

Desai: They're kind of all like basic communication skills that somebody should have taught you when you were 5 years old: To listen and to be receptive and, instead of coming up with your next thought, let them finish what they're saying because that's when you figure out what the real legal issue is.

I think a big part of CARPLS is just teaching you to slow down and think about what legal issues are. People sometimes don't know the importance of what they're telling you so you have to listen and evaluate the importance yourself.

I think the flip side for CARPLS is that the areas of law you're trained in are the areas of law that your friends and family are most likely to ask you about. I think everybody in Chicago has a friend who's been evicted from his or her apartment or who's been told "We're turning the building into condos so you've got to leave" or some variation of some housing issue. Well, actually, that's a violation of the Chicago [Residential Landlord and Tenant Ordinance]. You're not giving them legal advice, but they should do a little more investigation. **CL**

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