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“Choose a freedom you are guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. How is it under attack, and what can be done to protect it?”

One thing that’s always been important to me is fairness. When I was little, if I did well at my piano lesson, I’d get a sticker. I worked for that sticker. I focused hard, played my scales, memorized my music, I earned it. But sometimes my brother would come along with my mom to pick me up and the teacher would just give him a sticker! It was outrageous. He did nothing to deserve the sticker! It wasn’t fair. Even at a young age, I knew what was fair and what wasn’t.

You know what’s fair? The guaranteed freedom that every individual has the right to a trial by a jury and the access to a criminal defense lawyer. What’s not fair is that those who can’t afford their own lawyer are stuck with an overworked public defense attorney. There are too many people charged with felonies who can’t afford a lawyer, (eighty percent, in fact), and there just aren’t enough public defenders to properly represent everyone. Statistics show that public defense attorneys spend less than one hour on each case, compared to privately hired attorneys who spend closer to eight to ten hours on a case. Because of this, ninety-five percent of the time, clients of public defenders end up pleading guilty since they do not have the opportunity to even consider another approach with their lawyer.

Our lack of proper legal representation for the poor is an abuse of the Sixth Amendment right which states that every arrested individual has equal rights to many things, one of which being a criminal defense lawyer. That doesn’t mean that if you have more money, you can hire a better lawyer, and get out of a sticky situation with minimal negative results, while those who can’t afford a lawyer are thrown in jail. *That* is not fair. This freedom of ours is under attack.

To protect the freedom guaranteed to us by the Sixth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, we need to end the cycle of underprivileged citizens being arrested, inadequately represented, and punished. This begins with the public defenders. We need more of them and fewer cases assigned to each. They need the opportunity to do their best for each client, to study the case and contemplate all options in depth, not just opting for the easy out: pleading guilty. There’s an unfair situation here, so we need to be proactive, make a change... that’s what I did about the piano sticker situation. I spoke with my teacher and explained my concern. I told her it wasn’t fair and I wouldn’t support the injustice. Guess what? My brother never got another sticker at my piano lesson again. It was that easy. We *need* to make a change in our defense system. We *need* to protect our freedom. We *need* to make things fair.