

Behind the scenes at the Midwest Innocence Project: a conversation with Nicole Forys, our Intake Analyst.

by Tricia Rojo Bushnell

Nicole is the Intake Analyst for Midwest Innocence Project, which means she's on the front lines collecting stories and vetting potential cases for eligibility.

It's work that requires her to look at difficult and unjust circumstances every day. It's also the essential first step in the long journey toward justice for our clients.

I wanted to share with you a recent conversation with Nicole about what she does - and why she does it. I think it will give you a little more insight into our process and about the perseverance, perspective, and passion of the people who work here.

Nicole, what's a day like for you as an Intake Analyst?

I respond to questions, needs, and inquiries. And I listen to everyone's situation and evaluate whether or not they meet our initial criteria. If they do, we invite them to apply and walk them through the application process.

Some days I've got ten new requests that come in through the mail alone, maybe another ten via email - there is so much need. And it's not just people who have been convicted or are facing convictions. It's their loved ones, their friends, or even people they don't know who have taken interest in cases they think we should take a look at.

For a lot of people, reaching out to us is a last resort, their last beacon of hope.

What are the criteria that an applicant needs to meet to be considered by Midwest Innocence Project?

They need to be asking for help with a criminal conviction, and it must be within the five states we serve. They must be done with their trial and have already exhausted their direct appeal. In most cases, they can't have current representation. They must be claiming total innocence, which means they weren't involved in the crime in any way. And they must have at least 10 years remaining on their sentence, because the reality is that working toward exoneration takes time.

Your work gives you an inside perspective on America's incarceration crisis. What do you wish more people knew?

The thing that I'm reminded of again and again is how easily this can happen to anyone, and how devastating it is when it happens to you. So often, the difference between getting justice and not getting justice is monetary - it's the ability to hire the right team, or get the right tests, or the inability to do so.

This job makes me very conscious of privilege, and how often we don't recognize it, because we aren't exposed to things like this that make it obvious. When you see what I see every day, it opens your eyes to how people truly don't have a chance without money to support their case.

There's no question that this is heavy, emotionally taxing work. What keeps you motivated, keeps you getting up and going to work in the morning?

I mean, obviously there are the success stories - the cases that have been worked on, the people who have been exonerated. But I'm most motivated by the cases we haven't taken yet.

Every day, I think about a woman who wrote in who was incarcerated for the death of her infant child. You can tell she is probably from a small town, under-resourced, probably wasn't given a lot of opportunities and education. Her baby was really sick, and died of malnutrition, and she was charged with murder.

She has other kids. I was going through things recently and I came across photos she'd sent in of her with her surviving children. Her story just stopped me in my tracks. I think about her every day.

Of course, I don't know for sure that anyone is innocent. But I am sure that it's likely that with my resources, I'd have had a better chance at justice than she did.

That's what I mean about privilege. I have what I need, and the tools and education - I can't imagine facing what she is facing without those tools.

That's why I'm here.

This is deeply personal work you do.

Our bucket is so big. I don't know if we'll ever get to her case, or be able to represent her. She may be in prison for the rest of her kids' lives. There is so much urgent need, and so few resources. We're working every day to create more opportunities for justice.

What can people do to support you and the individuals and families you're serving?

It starts with just talking about it. This kind of work has always been very interesting to me, so I'm always surprised when I'm in a conversation and someone has never heard of the innocence movement and the work we do. When big stories appear in the news cycles, people pay attention, but it fades away out of people's awareness.

People don't connect that there's a much bigger need behind those single stories.

Yes, for every big news story of a wrongful conviction that the public gets attached to, or every podcast that goes viral, there are literally thousands of other stories.

It's easy for us to ignore that reality because it's tucked away where we don't see it. But you see it every day in your inbox.

Everyone who works here is driven by a true sense of justice. We wouldn't be here if we weren't. And it's a process - once someone has been convicted, it's a tough, tough road to reverse it. A judge and jury can make a decision very quickly that can impact not just a person, but an entire family, for generations.

This job has made me think a lot about how I would be as a juror, and what it means to pass judgment on someone. Because the impact is a lifetime long. It's so easily done, but it's so difficult to undo.

I think a lot of people think that anyone who is in prison deserves to be there, for one reason or another.

I wish more people would challenge that belief.

I see every day how it simply isn't true.

If you'd like to learn more about the work of the Midwest Innocence Project and how you can help us work for justice for the wrongfully convicted, visit us at <https://themip.org/>