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Associate Departs Big Law to Create Pro Se Online Startup

Proposed cuts to legal aid nationwide spurred Dorna Moini to take a leap in October and leave Sidley Austin to launch HelpSelf Legal.

By Angela Morris | Originally published on [The Recorder \(/therecorder/\)](#) | January 04, 2018



Dorna Moini.

Although she spent the first six years of her career in Big Law, California attorney Dorna Moini always knew that her true passion was in human rights and access to justice.

After graduating from the University of Southern California Gould School of Law in 2012, Moini, who has dual citizenship in the United States and Iran, worked at Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton and then at Sidley Austin.

But Big Law practice wasn't her calling. Her experiences gained from frequent travel between the United States and Iran, plus a fellowship as an undergraduate helping draft legislation to outlaw slavery in northwest Africa, and her pro bono work as a Big Law associate provided a window into the stark divide in access to justice here and abroad. And she was driven to do something about it.

"It works great for people who have money," Moini said.

It was the proposed cuts to legal aid nationwide that spurred Moini to take a leap in October and leave Sidley to launch HelpSelf Legal, an online platform for self-represented litigants to create documents and filings in routine legal matters. HelpSelf's first product is designed to assist domestic violence victims in California. Moini expects to expand to other types of legal matters and more states.

"Hopefully, we'll have a system that will allow people to have much greater success than they would if they were going it on their own," said Moini, who lives in Los Angeles.

Moini, 30, handles the legal aspects of HelpSelf, and her partner Michael Joseph, a technology engineer, is responsible for building out the online platform. Users pay \$15 to access the site, which walks them through user-friendly questions that gather information central to the case and prompts them to upload copies of key evidence and documents. HelpSelf Legal also plans to license its software to California legal aid organizations, charging a sliding scale based on what they can pay.

Moini self-funded the startup with her own savings and said the largest expense so far is Joseph's salary, which she declined to disclose. Moini isn't yet taking a salary for herself.

Moini's interest in access to justice issues is rooted in her experience as a New York University undergraduate student. There, she took a fellowship with Open Society Justice Initiative, a program of New York nonprofit Open Society Foundations, and SOS Esclaves, a Mauritania, Africa-based nongovernment organization. Moini helped draft legislation in Mauritania, in northwest Africa, to create legal ramifications for slave holders, including a 10-year prison sentence, [according to Open Society Justice Initiative \(https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/press-releases/open-society-justice-initiative-hails-mauritanias-new-antislavery-law\)](https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/press-releases/open-society-justice-initiative-hails-mauritanias-new-antislavery-law), which estimated there were 500,000 slaves in Mauritania in 2007 when the law passed.

After her experience in Mauritania, Moini knew that she wanted to become a lawyer. "I saw how much the law could change people's lives," she recalled.

But Moini decided after law school to join a big firm. Her strategy, she said, was to get the training and background to set her up for future pursuits. She first became a litigation associate at Sheppard Mullin and three years later jumped to Sidley Austin, where as an associate she represented companies involved in employment litigation.

"It was really excellent training," Moini said. "I think I really developed as a lawyer and public speaker and advocate through working in Big Law."

Sidley Austin partner Wendy Lazerson in Palo Alto, who worked closely with Moini, said she was sorry to see Moini leave.

"She sees the glass half full at all times," said Lazerson, who practices employment law. "It makes it much more enjoyable when you have people on your team that see the good in every situation."

Lazerson said when she learned that Moini was launching HelpSelf to support legal services for the poor, she thought it would fill a need in the community and help legal aid clinics.

“Dorna is somebody who people are drawn to, and she will be successful in whatever she does,” she said. “If she was going to leave Sidley, I was glad to see she was doing it to pursue a passion of hers and something I really support.”

Much of Moini’s passion to help self-represented litigants came from her pro bono practice during her Big Law life. She represented domestic violence victims in trial and on appeal, asylum applicants in immigration cases, indigent clients in employment cases and performed some housing work.

“I felt working with those types of people who really need you and can’t afford a lawyer was really fulfilling to me. It’s much more emotionally rewarding,” she said.

Living in Silicon Valley—surrounded by technology offerings for everything from transportation to dog-sitting—Moini had often thought about using technology to help low- and moderate-income people to access the courts. She said she was prompted to change her career path when President Donald Trump [recommended slashing funding](https://www.law.com/texaslawyer/almID/1202781525822/chief-justice-on-proposed-legal-aid-cuts-you-cant-just-be-for-the-rich-folks/?back=law) (<https://www.law.com/texaslawyer/almID/1202781525822/chief-justice-on-proposed-legal-aid-cuts-you-cant-just-be-for-the-rich-folks/?back=law>) to the Legal Services Corp., the nonprofit that distributes funds for civil legal aid across the nation. Congress is still hashing out the final federal budget.

“The resources are continuously being taken away,” Moini said. “I thought there was an opportunity to add technology to make things more efficient.”

Moini’s pro bono work with domestic violence victims had taught her the ins and outs of that area of law, which is why HelpSelf Legal launched its first product to help domestic violence victims—which also helps the victim’s children out of a bad situation.

“I saw a long-term impact: You help one person, but potentially, you’re helping several generations,” she said.

Angela Morris is a freelance reporter. Follow her on Twitter at @AMorrisReports

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