

In This Issue

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Pro Bono Month ...

Passion & Commitment Drive PB Law, Providing an Array of Benefits—Part One

Happy Pro Bono Month. In this the first of a two-installation article, we explore the reflections and motivations of pro bono law leaders as well as some of the benefits this public service offers the law firms that provide it. Next month in Part Two, we’ll present some summaries of specific matters and cases handled by the four law firms featured in this installation.

downturns. That was certainly the case when the dot.com bubble burst at the dawn of this century as well as during the Great Recession.

But these days law firms seem to be more committed than ever—and *Of Counsel* has regularly tracked PB law for at least 30 years—to providing resources, promoting,

While many law firms have embraced and financially supported pro bono legal services for decades, the focus and investment in this important work ebbs and flows. Not surprisingly, partnerships pull their support back and cut pro bono budgets during economic

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and placing an enthusiastic emphasis on these complementary legal services.

And nowhere do you feel that enthusiasm more emphatically than from the lawyers who dedicate their careers to this area and lead their partnerships' pro bono programs.

Consider Sara Ghadiri, the full-time pro bono counsel at Chicago-based Chapman. She proudly showcases her support for this work through words and deeds. In fact, she even has "pro bono" personalized license

plates. "The one with the 'o's' was taken, but I got the one where the 'o's' are zeros," says Ghadiri. Her efforts have been widely recognized and she was recently named the recipient of the 2024 National Public Service Award from the American Bar Association ABA Business Law Section.

"Do the Right Thing"

At Palo Alto-based Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, another award-winning recipient, Luke Liss, serves as the firm's pro bono partner. When asked about the importance of this work—which enables lawyers to "do the right thing," as director Spike Lee might say—he says that the words of one of his early-career mentors still resonates with him. Mark Parnes led Wilson Sonsini pro bono program for many years and instilled in Liss the significance of community service.

"Mark always talked about how it's our obligation as attorneys to give back, and I really take that to heart," Liss says, adding that he had many troubles while growing up.

"I wasn't supposed to end up at Stanford [where he earned his law degree] or at a law firm like this," he says. "It's such a privilege to be able to practice law. To be able pay it forward is really a joy. Also, we all live in our communities so we at the firm want to contribute positively to our communities and to the global community—and we work to increase access to justice. When we're doing that, it's a better world."

That guiding principle seems to act as a key plank in the philosophy of all four of the attorneys interviewed for this article and their law firms. "Pro bono is a reflection of how we live our values," says Lisa Dewey, who more than 20 years ago became the first full-time pro bono partner for the global firm DLA Piper. "It's one of our core values and pillars of our strategy. So, it's very integrated into everything that the firm does."

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Pro Bono Month

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Dewey says she joined the firm because of its commitment to pro bono and notes that DLA Piper has, including herself, seven full-time pro bono counsel in the United States and many more practicing in offices around the world. “And, we all work very closely together as a team to promote our pro bono mission,” she says.

The word “mission” comes up often in discussions with lawyers managing these programs, as does “relationships.” From the Chicago offices of another international partnership, Dentons, pro bono partner Ben Weinberg discusses the collaboration he and his colleagues build with the attorneys who serve on the front lines.

“When we identify a legal need in the community, such as advocacy for domestic violence survivors [for whom Dentons often represents], we cultivate relationships and work with the legal aid organizations, who are the experts,” he says. In collaboration with them, Dentons’ attorneys “contribute to meaningful access to justice, which is incredibly important.”

Taking Relationships to New Levels

Performing public service work also contributes to the creation of a side benefit of pro bono law, in addition to the primary purpose of helping those in need. That is, it acts as a catalyst for a lawyer’s other, revenue-producing legal matters.

“At a human level, we all know that it feels good to help people,” Weinberg says. “And when you help someone in a pro bono matter, someone who desperately needs a lawyer, that serves as the warmth of the fireplace that

keeps you going during those late nights when you’re working on a summary judgment brief for a paying client.”

Speaking of which, pro bono service also enhances the relationships with those fee-paying clients, according to Ghadiri. “We look for opportunities that fit with what we do and try to find folks in the community that need the help,” she says. “So, we build a lot of strong relationships with legal services organizations and with our paying clients; we’ve been able to involve a lot of those clients in our work, and it’s been great all around.”

Dewey agrees and characterizes those relationships as a true benefit this work provides to DLA Piper and other firms. “It connects us with the legal services providers in our communities, and those are nonprofits working in the trenches, often in incredibly challenging circumstances,” she says. “And we get to be connected with them and walk alongside them, benefitting from their support and mentorship.”

Dewey also recognizes the client connections this community service fosters. “Pro bono also connects us with our corporate clients, which is an incredible privilege,” she says. “We team up quite a bit with in-house counsel, and it’s a real joy to be able to work together on these matters. It deepens those relationships. We learn about each other in a way that may be different because some of the pro bono work that we do together can be very personal for people.”

Paying Other Dividends

While performing public service with clients generates goodwill, it can also lead to more paid work, which of course helps drive law firm revenues and profits. A lawyer who spoke on background for this story talked about a national client who had teamed up with his firm on a pro bono matter. “That case went very smoothly, and the in-house lawyers and our group gained a great deal of

satisfaction in winning it together,” the lawyer says. “A month or so after it was completed, this company called us up and hired a team of our attorneys to do *a lot* of top-tier, high-paying work that we hadn’t expected.”

In addition, this form of legal service provides a training platform for young lawyers. “It’s a really great way to learn an area of the law that you are interested in, to get skills that are transferable,” Ghadiri says. “So, if you have to interview a client to draft whatever it is, it doesn’t matter who the client is. You’ll do the interview with the same sort of skill set that you’ll need for another [paid] case. You can also improve other substantive skills, like how to write a brief and how to go to court.”

Public service law offers yet another perk. It can reduce lawyer attrition, which is especially important today with younger lawyers who value this type of community work [see the editorial on pages three and four]. “Another benefit to Denton, besides the access to justice and all this other good stuff, is it keeps our talented lawyers at the firm,” Weinberg says. “It’s a retention mechanism.”

An additional ancillary but important outcome of pro bono work is that it often augments leadership and team-building skills.

Wilson Sonsini’s Liss saw this unfold when a team of young attorneys won a successful settlement for a client in Louisiana who had filed a lawsuit alleging she was a victim of discriminatory and violent policing. [For more details on this case and other pro bono matters handled by Wilson Sonsini and the other firms mentioned in this story, look for part two of this article in the November issue of *Of Counsel*.]

“We had a legal team of all women,” Liss explains. “They were litigating this case extremely vigorously against opposing counsel who were strong and very aggressive, but we helped our folks get very ready for trial. I’m proud of the way they handled it and proud of the way they built a relationship with the client, who was very courageous.”

Liss says this case demonstrates that “pro bono often offers an opportunity to step up and be leaders. And that’s what the women on this team did. They also had each other’s back throughout. They supported each other every step of the way and helped make each other better lawyers. I’m excited to see what they do next.” ■

—Steven T. Taylor

Taylor's Perspective ...

Pro Bono Law: One Way to Address Two, Related Issues

In the last few years law firms have grappled with a couple of issues and much has been written and talked about both of them: mental health and lawyer attrition.

Law firm leadership, human resource professionals, and hiring and talent committees regularly brainstorm internally and seek outside help to generate and implement ways to enhance mental well-being and attorney retention. No single antidote exists to cure the two inter-related problems; nor are there any easy multiple solutions. But one service delivery model and practice seems to help: pro bono legal service.

When you ask lawyers about what motivated them to go to law school and enter the profession—and I've asked that question virtually every month for 30 years for our *Of Counsel* Interview feature—the vast majority of them give this answer in some form or another: “I wanted to help people, particularly those in need, with their problems.” There's nothing naively idealistic or altruistic about this sentiment serving as a reason and an inspiration to enter law school and practice law. It's sincere and it's worthy.

It would be easy and cynical to say that most lawyers completely lose their sense of that early-on motivation and purpose, but sometimes they ... shall we say ... misplace it. Because let's face it: It's easy to forget about that driving-force commitment while

operating in the context of private practice – what with the race to pile up billable hours, the internecine politics within law firms, the sometimes-cut-throat competition to land or wrestle away a big-name, top-paying client from a rival firm ... the list goes on.

Pro bono work often helps attorneys rekindle that need to serve others. It helps them find meaning, which lifts mental health, and that makes them better, happier lawyers, and happier lawyers tend to stay where they are and not have a legal recruiter's name and number at the top of their phone's contacts list.

One thing that's certain is that the young generation of lawyers has as much, or perhaps more, interest in performing free legal work and giving to their communities as their older colleagues. It's common knowledge that younger lawyers are very interested and even passionate about giving back to their communities, and they often come to private practice with a wide range of issues on which they want to work on a pro bono basis.

Of course, this is nothing new (although it might be a more pervasive outlook today than ever before). Back in 2013, I spoke to Michael Gonring, a partner (now retired) at Milwaukee-based Quarles & Brady who built a national reputation for the monumental pro bono work he performed, receiving numerous honors for his successful efforts.

“This generation coming out of law school wants to and expects to do pro bono,” he said at the time. “And I tell the young associates that they are the ones who are going to narrow the justice gap [between the need for legal help and the ability to get it]: ‘We’re doing what we can but you’re the lawyers who are going to have to close the gap.’”

Gonring mentioned that he and his partners showcased (and they still do) their free-of-charge legal service to those in need. “We tout it,” he said, “and, invariably, we’ll have associates tell us one of the reasons they came to us is because of our pro bono program.”

Increasingly, young attorneys also want to see that the law firm they choose to join doesn’t shy away from taking a stand on societal issues that some people—including some clients—might consider controversial. That is, they’re often attracted to partnerships that get actively and publicly involved, via pro bono work, in addressing climate change, economic and racial justice, voting rights, and other such hot-button issues.

Helping Them Stay Put

On the attrition/retention front, while law firms aren’t scrambling as much these days to hire and retain bright, young lawyers—the talent wars of a couple of years ago are over, for now—keeping them is still a major concern. Often, young attorneys are impressed by law firms that demonstrate a commitment to a wide array of community service initiatives, most of all, pro bono legal work. It may not be the first or even the second employment and retention driver for them but for most it’s clearly an important career criterion. Simply put, they want to do good.

They also value a collaborative work environment with a vibrant and supportive culture. Pro bono law helps nurture such an ecosystem, even with the continued popularity of remote-work arrangements that many firms still have.

“Pro bono work provides an opportunity for attorneys who maybe don’t work with each other in a firm, to get to know each other and work together for the common goal, to foster that sense of community, not only within the firm but outside of it,” says Sara Ghadiri, the pro bono counsel at Chicago-based Chapman.

“When attorneys provide pro bono service,” she adds, “they know in their hearts that this is an opportunity to be an active member of their community. So, we’re building community within the firm and we’re building community within the greater areas where we live.”

Of course, it’s no secret that some firms say they’re committed to pro bono work but really only pay lip service, which ultimately sends the wrong message through the ranks of the partnership. It essentially says: “We don’t want to do this but we don’t want the PR fall-out if we don’t.” That attitude can dampen law firm culture and drive people out the door.

Additionally, that negativity can seep outward. That is, there’s clearly a danger of bad publicity if a firm shows only a half-hearted commitment. “Lackluster pro bono efforts can tarnish your brand because you fool nobody,” says an East Coast PR consultant who works with some firms who don’t genuinely embrace pro bono; consequently, the consultant asked to remain nameless.

So, at risk of repetition, let me hammer down the theme: Pro bono service helps address the inter-connected mental health/attrition concerns—in addition to offering many other benefits (see the front-page story for more on this). But what should not be lost is the primary and most important reason to do work at no charge: You’re helping people in need. All firms of any significant size should give back to the communities in which they operate; after all law firms certainly *get* a lot from their communities. ■

—Steven T. Taylor