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THE PLACE TO NETWORK

Pro Bono Networking

For the Good of the Public, And Your Legal Career

By Christy Burke

Pro bono publico, often shortened to “pro bono,” means “for the public good.” Since the start of the legal profession, magnanimous lawyers have engaged in pro bono work to give underprivileged and indigent clients access to equal and fair treatment by the justice system.

In recent years, the pro bono tradition has continued to flourish, a reflection of the true dedication that attorneys have to making a difference in their communities. In spite of the everlasting drive to bill more hours or service more paying clients, many law firms and bar associations enthusiastically support pro bono activities, with some firms even granting credit for the hours spent on such cases.

BENEFITS

Pro bono work can be very meaningful and rewarding, and it can have other benefits as well, especially when it comes to networking. Certainly, the lawyers doing pro bono work are not thinking, “What’s in it for me?” from a business standpoint. However, there are real returns that result from investing time and energy in pro bono work, and those can have a direct, positive impact on an attorney’s legal career and business as well.

Tripp Greason, Pro Bono Director at Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, PLLC, notes that lawyers can easily fall into the trap of seeing every day as a stack of 240 six-minute increments. Feeling overburdened by client work, these professionals sometimes balk at anything being added, such as pro bono work. Greason seeks to make lawyers look differently at pro bono work, to realize its manifold benefits to society, to the firm, and to the individual attorney.

He says, “We can all agree with our colleagues at Hunton & Williams that the practice of law is not only a service to our clients, it is also a service to society. Our society and democracy depend on the fair and open access to our legal system for all citizens, and lawyers are the only citizens licensed to perform that service. So understood, the time question takes care of itself, and the secondary benefits of pro bono practice such as business development, community relations, earned media, training, recruiting, etc. can flow.”

PRO BONO ACTIVITIES

Womble Carlyle has engaged in a wide range of pro bono activities, including providing legal services to victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and ongoing work with veterans with service-connected disabilities. From a networking and business perspective, Greason notes that pro bono work has proven to be an effective way to enhance the firm’s relationships with general counsels.

According to Greason, “From a business development point of view, a robust pro bono practice can be a decided advantage when dealing with clients. For example, when trying to land the client, pro bono says something about the firm — that it has values other than simply making money. That sense of value is likely to pervade the firm and make it more attractive to clients.”

One of Womble Carlyle’s attorneys is Georgiana L. Yonuschot, who works in the firm’s Winston-Salem, NC, office. Yonuschot has her MSW as well as her JD, and she brought her social work roots right into lawyering. In 2008, she was the recipient of the Pro Bono Impact Award from Business Leader Media and the North Carolina Bar Association Young Lawyers Division Pro Bono Award. Between the years of 2006-2008 she provided an average of 450 hours per year of

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pro bono service while maintaining her demanding commercial practice at the firm.

Yonuschot enjoys her pro bono work immensely, remarking that it reminds her of why she joined the legal profession. "I've found pro bono work to be some of the most challenging, interesting and meaningful work I do as a lawyer. It's creative, it's optimistic and it matters. Finally and most fundamentally, pro bono work is a professional responsibility that is a joy to fulfill."

In the past several years, she has helped victims of Hurricane Katrina, worked with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children on an international child custody claim, and has acted on behalf of North Carolina's abused and neglected children as a guardian ad litem appellate advocate.

Yonuschot is grateful that her firm supports her pro bono work, and she has also been able to expand her legal skills and experience as a result. For example, her work with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children allowed her to have her case heard by a federal court judge. "Pro bono activities have been invaluable in enhancing my knowledge of my practice area and other areas of law as well as improving my research, drafting and client interaction skills. Improving my skills benefits my pro bono clients as well as my paying clients."

ASSOCIATES AND YOUNG LAWYERS

As Yonuschot's example shows, pro bono work can be especially

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useful for associates and young lawyers because it catapults them into situations where they need to stretch beyond their level of comfort. Laura Kolesar, Coordinator of the Public Service Network for the New York City Bar Justice Center, observes that pro bono work can be a great career propellant for young associates, in addition to fulfilling a service to society.

Kolesar says, "Many people believe it is part of a lawyer's ethical obligation as a member of the Bar to engage in some pro bono activity. Beyond that, pro bono work is an excellent way to hone technical skills, learn about new areas of law, and meet people in the legal community. Pro bono often allows young associates the opportunity to do more hands-on work and get more experience, including making court appearances, than they might as one of many working for a client at a large firm."

She acknowledges that pro bono activity can also be a great networking opportunity. Whether representing a client alongside another volunteer or working with staff at a nonprofit or legal services provider, lawyers doing pro bono are meeting new people and forming professional connections. Kolesar says, "For a new attorney, pro bono is a way to establish professional connections. For more experienced attorneys, it can be an opportunity to practice law in a new area, exposing them to new practitioners in the field."

BENEFITS TO SOLOS AND SMALLER FIRMS

Solos and small firm attorneys also have much to gain from servicing pro bono clients. Even though they don't have a big firm standing behind them, they can make a huge difference, person to person. And sometimes, this altruistic service can lead to paid work as well.

Kira Fonteneau runs a solo law practice in Birmingham, AL. She represents children with diabetes in school discrimination cases, and also gives educational seminars for parents to inform them about laws

regarding school accommodations. This stream of pro bono work led from Fonteneau's service on the local board of the American Diabetes Association. She began as a board member and over time, the non-profit started to refer cases from parents who needed legal assistance.

Fonteneau says the pro bono work has definitely impacted her legal business in a positive way. "From my perspective, it provides me an opportunity to meet new people and extend my name recognition while allowing me to help others. Often, the clients I meet in pro bono would never have known I existed. After I help, they call me with all their legal questions because they know, like and trust me."

Her pro bono work has led to paid client work for Fonteneau. She helped a mother and child draft a 504 plan and a month later, the mother needed help with a labor issue with her employer and Fonteneau was there ready to provide service. Overall, Fonteneau says that pro bono work has the soft benefit of showing that you are someone who cares about helping others, not just about making money, and that's always good for business.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Some smart and enterprising attorneys have actually managed to leverage pro bono legal work as a major business stimulant. Though the initial impetus for their efforts is still to provide a service to the public, they have been able to reap big rewards in terms of business development. One such attorney is Sara Hanley, partner at Place and Hanley PLLC in Southern Pines, NC. Hanley primarily practices family and matrimonial law. She teamed up with a few local colleagues to host seminars entitled "Women Take Charge: Your Divorce, Your Money, Your Life." The sessions were designed to help women who were contemplating or going through a divorce to explore their legal, financial and lifestyle options. Hanley followed up the seminars by providing free

consultations to the women that attended.

Hanley says that these pro bono seminars really helped her expand her practice. She notes, "My practice really took off after the first seminar. The networking and publicity helped me establish myself in the community. I was retained by many of the women who attended the seminar. Also, I created strong ties with the other professional women who hosted the event and today we often refer clients to each other. I find that the clients whom you represent pro bono are typically so grateful for your efforts

that they gladly tell all their friends and family about your firm. This in turn will result in many paying clients retaining your services."

She explains that the referral network that resulted from the public seminars was so expansive that she could reduce the amount of paid advertising she had been purchasing. "This was a great financial benefit to my firm because it allowed us to cut our advertising costs while expanding our practice."

CONCLUSION

Pro bono work has many diverse advantages, running the

gamut from personal satisfaction to community improvement, and also bringing networking, skill enhancement and potential business gains as well. In doing right by others, you are actually doing right by yourself and are in a position to realize myriad benefits. In working for the good of the public, you are also working for the good of your own legal career. Ideally, working *pro bono publico* equals working pro bono you!

