

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 156, No. 70

Monday, April 12, 2010

Amicus Curious

Firm does pro bono work for university

By Maria Kantzavelos
Law Bulletin staff writer

For Marc R. Kadish, Mayer, Brown LLP's longtime director of pro bono activities and litigation training, there's nothing like a visit to a faraway land like Bangladesh, and some time with eager, young learners, to reinvigorate his outlook on the legal profession.

That's where Kadish landed last month as the firm's first lawyer to visit the Asian University for Women, which the firm took on as a pro bono project nearly 10 years ago, he said.

The university, which is said to be the only university of its kind in Asia, aims to advance the cause of women's education in Asia, particularly women from impoverished, rural and refugee backgrounds.

Kadish's recent trip featured visits with students, meetings with faculty and administrators — which include women from the United States and Asia — and meetings with law professors from schools in Chittagong.

He stopped for a visit following a stint in Cambodia, where he had been teaching trial advocacy to law students there through the American Bar Association's Rule of Law Initiative.

"It was very exciting," Kadish said, referring to his visit to the university for women. "Bangladesh is a very poor country, and it's very chaotic. But the girls were all excited, and they were all eager to learn."

"It was a real recharging of batteries for me," Kadish said. "To go overseas and meet with enthusiastic, younger-generation people in both Cambodia and Bangladesh who are interested in helping to establish a rule of law in different countries and cultures, it can't help but recharge your batteries and get you excited, and remind yourself of why I wanted to become a lawyer. ... To help fight for social justice."

The university is operating from temporary rental quarters in Chittagong, and the AUW residential campus, designed by internationally renowned Israeli architect Moshe Safdie, is



Students attend a lecture as part of the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh. The university, which welcomed its first students in 2008, has been the focus of a pro bono project for Mayer, Brown LLP since 2001.

constructed in the outskirts of the city, Kadish said.

As preparation for their undergraduate studies, a first group of about 150 students in April 2008 began a one-year course of study at the so-called Access Academy. By August 2009, that first group of students began their undergraduate studies as the first freshmen class of AUW, where courses are taught in English, Kadish said. He noted that the AUW has seen 300 students from more than a dozen countries, including Cambodia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

One project the firm is working on involves a pledge of funding from a woman of Iranian background wishing to donate money to the school on the condition that it would bring in Iranian students, Kadish said.

"There are laws in the U.S. which might make that difficult, but we're working with the government to see if we can work that out," he said.

Kadish said the university for women was the brainchild of former Mayer, Brown associate Kamal Ahmad,

a native of Bangladesh who had been practicing in the firm's London office when he raised the idea of the creation of a university for women that would increase access to higher education in poorer countries.

That was about a decade ago, around the time when Kadish had joined the firm.

"We thought it was a wonderful idea, but had no idea if it was going to be successful," Kadish said. "It took him a number of years to have the dream come through fruition. He chased all over the world for money."

Ahmad, who has since left the firm, now serves as president and CEO of the Asian University for Women Support Foundation in Cambridge, Mass., a non-profit entity of volunteers from around the world that serves as a main fundraising arm for the university.

Over the years, Kadish said, Mayer, Brown lawyers have devoted nearly 1,000 hours of pro bono legal services on behalf of the university, ranging from the preparation of such items as the

continued...

incorporation papers and tax exemption application, drafting its charter and contracts for the hiring of faculty and administrators, and assisting with memoranda of understanding with governments so that the university could expand its reach to students from different countries.”

Kadish said Sonia Baldia, a Mayer, Brown partner who co-chairs the firm’s India practice, has been serving as the coordinator of pro bono legal needs that surface.

The university offers a five-year joint bachelor’s and master’s program in liberal arts that aims to give women the skills and education to assume leadership roles in their own countries.

“They’re seeking to have the women learn how to become independent thinkers, and to become leaders in their countries,” Kadish said.

During his recent visit, Kadish said he offered a presentation to a new class of students in the preparatory Access

Academy about the role of lawyers in achieving social justice.

On the trip, he was pleasantly surprised to see a student who had been a part of the trial advocacy program he assisted with in Cambodia a couple years ago.

And, Kadish said, “there were also some very sad stories.”

“One young woman came up to me who wanted to learn how to do justice in the world, because her cousin had been murdered by the military in their home country,” he said. “The family hired a lawyer and she was trying to work with him. She said the lawyer was then murdered, and she herself was arrested and tortured by the government.

“That was very poignant and heart-wrenching,” Kadish said. “She would like to become a lawyer one day.”

He said the firm has offered to assist with the possibility of the university getting a law program off the ground, a topic of discussion during his visit with

law professors.

There are some questions to puzzle through, such as how the women would be educated to become lawyers in their own countries, if the law school is not of their countries of origin.

“That’s one of the problems they’re going to have to grapple with,” Kadish said. “My advice was, given the status of the university ... I thought it should remain as an undergraduate legal program where the women would be trained to work for international NGOs and could return to their home countries. And if they wanted to attend law schools in their own countries, then they’d be properly equipped for it.”

In any case, Kadish said, “I think it’s very, very exciting to be involved in the future establishment of a law school that would exist solely for women in Asia, which would have as its aim for the women to return to their native countries and assist in the establishment of the rule of law.”