

Closing Argument > column



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Changes in large firm pro bono

I became the director of pro bono activities and clinical legal education at Mayer Brown on June 1, 1999. Prior to joining the firm, I was a clinical teacher at Chicago-Kent College of Law for 20 years. I taught evidence, lawyering skills classes and worked with students in a fee-generating criminal defense clinic.

Shortly after joining the firm, the *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin* wrote an article on my new position titled “Ex-prof leads firm on trek to public service.” The title was chosen because the article had a picture of me with my youngest daughter on a camel in the Moroccan desert. Re-reading the article enabled me to reflect on how far the “trek” has taken me in the past 11 years. What changes have taken place in the law firm, my position and the role of pro bono in large firms?

Some changes are obvious from reading the caption underneath the picture that accompanied the article. The firm is no longer Mayer, Brown & Platt. We combined with a British firm and were Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw. Now, we are simply Mayer Brown. The firm has doubled in size. When I started, I shared a secretary with other lawyers. Now our program has an assistant director of pro bono activities in our Washington, D.C., office, a pro bono partner in our London office, a full-time pro bono paralegal and secretarial assistance. We also have a firm-wide pro bono committee with two co-chairs and local pro bono committees in most of our offices.

My title and responsibilities have also changed. I am the director of pro bono activities and litigation training. The original notion was that I would act as a clinical law professor at the firm, working with lawyers rather than law students. I was asked to shape the program with the twin goals of doing pro bono and to also help with the training of our

young lawyers. Just as the firm grew, so too did my responsibilities. I was asked to expand our formal simulated litigation training program. Since the title of director of pro bono activities and clinical education and litigation training could not fit on a business card, we dropped the clinical education part. But I must admit that this was, and still is, the favorite part of my job.

Also, I realized that although many things have changed, some challenges continue to this day. Debora de Hoyos, then-managing partner, spoke about the challenge of finding pro bono work for transactional lawyers: I had practiced state criminal defense work and appointed federal cases for the 31 years I was a lawyer before joining the firm. I had never tried a civil case.

I had little experience in depositions and no experience in large-scale discovery.

Now I was faced with the additional challenge of finding interesting and challenging work for a vast array of transactional lawyers. I wanted the transactional projects to mirror the type of sophisticated litigation projects we started.

Despite the fact that we have been involved in some sophisticated pro bono microfinance work throughout the world; have worked closely with the Corporation for Supportive Housing in developing multi-unit housing with social services for the chronically homeless; helped to develop a settlement assistance program in federal court for pro-se litigants that attracts both litigators and transactional lawyers; helped to develop a QDRO program (Qualified Domestic Relations Orders) for our ERISA lawyers; and helped to develop a program to assist Iraqi refugees who helped the American government and military and were being kidnapped and murdered at an alarming

rate, it is still easier to find criminal defense cases for our lawyers to work on.

In the article I spoke about wanting to develop “projects rather than just representing a mass of individual people ... so that we could ‘change our society as opposed to just applying a band-aid.’” All the projects listed either try to accomplish social change or at least help to strengthen the public-interest agencies we work with. While we do not handle many traditional legal aid cases, we have developed a financial contributions program that works in conjunction with our pro bono program.

Not everyone agrees with me on the issue of involvement with traditional legal aid cases. That issue brings us to a major change that has taken place over the past 10 years. It is the “institutionalization of pro bono.” When I started my job there was only one other full-time pro bono person in Chicago — Jonathan K. Baum, who is still at Katten Muchin. Now there are nine lawyers and three nonlawyers doing full-time or close to full-time pro bono work in Chicago. This mirrors what has taken place throughout the country. There are 91 people doing full-time pro bono work throughout the country. We have our own professional organization, the Association of Pro Bono Counsel.

We are also mindful of the fact that we function within law firms and a profession that is possibly undergoing some fundamental changes. When I started, and even more now, large-firm pro bono work needs to fill in the gaps that are not being met by government-sponsored legal aid programs.

Please feel free to call me or any of the other pro bono coordinators if your law firm wants to start a formal pro bono program. We would welcome you to our pro bono family. ■

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