

American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division
The Affiliate

Celebrate Pro Bono 2010: National Pro Bono Celebration

By Krима D. Shah

Building on the extraordinary success of the first annual National Pro Bono Celebration in 2009, the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service is sponsoring the Celebration again this year from October 24 through 30, 2010. The Celebration is a coordinated national effort to meet the ever-growing needs of this country's most vulnerable citizens by encouraging and supporting local efforts to expand the delivery of pro bono legal services and by showcasing the great difference that pro bono lawyers make to the nation, its system of justice, its communities, and, most of all, to the clients they serve.

The ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service chose to launch this important initiative because of the increasing need for pro bono services during these harsh economic times and the unprecedented response of attorneys to meet this demand.

Two examples of attorneys who have dedicated their time to pro bono work are Michael G. Bergmann, Director of Programs for the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI), and Justin L. Heather, an Associate with Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, LLP. Each describes in his own words below his interest, motivation, and dedication to pro bono work.

Michael Bergmann

"I was a political science major as an undergraduate, so I always envisioned public service would be a major aspect of whatever career path I undertook.

"I attended law school part-time while working full-time in a non-legal position at PricewaterhouseCoopers. Because of this, I didn't have much practical legal experience when I graduated, and I didn't have a job right out of law school. I started volunteering with a local pro bono agency and really enjoyed the work, the clients, and my 'co-workers.' I kept interviewing for paying jobs at firms, but never found a place that I thought was as good a fit for me as the agency that I was 'working' at—while not getting paid, which I had to keep reminding myself! After a few months, I had quite a caseload, and the agency had a staffing change that allowed it to hire me.

"I think the most rewarding and satisfying element of my public interest career has been truly knowing that my efforts make a major difference in the life of someone else. One of my first pro bono matters was helping a grandmother gain guardianship over her grandchildren who had been essentially abandoned by their parents. This case was not lengthy or complex, but my client did need the assistance of an attorney to navigate the process. When guardianship was granted, I had helped to make a family through my efforts on her behalf.

"I am Director of Programs for the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI), which has as its mission the goal of cultivating a lifelong commitment to public interest law among lawyers and law students. We have five programs that work to achieve this mission: an Internship Program for current law students and a Graduate Fellowship Program for recent law graduates through which we place these young public interest lawyers at public interest law organizations throughout Illinois. Since our inception, we have placed over 3,000 Interns and Fellows, so we have an Alumni Program to engage those individuals in our work and that of the public interest law community. We have a pro bono consulting project to foster business cultures at law firms and corporations and legal careers that spotlight a commitment to public interest law. Finally, we have a program to place recently deferred and displaced associates at public interest law placements.

"I also still handle pro bono matters, including adoption, landlord/tenant, and asylum. I anticipate continuing in the public interest law sector and either providing free legal assistance to the poor through my organization directly or through our programs, and/or by handling pro bono matters."

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Justin Heather

"My father raised us in an environment in which you 'gave until it hurt.' This background led me to become active in the Bluhm Legal Clinic at Northwestern to provide legal assistance to death row inmates and the wrongly convicted.

"My firm equally emphasizes the need to provide pro bono legal assistance and has always been supportive of my efforts in this regard. The most rewarding and satisfying cases have been those in which I have been able to make a direct and important impact on a person's life. Whether it is obtaining political asylum, achieving a successful settlement of a discrimination case, or simply providing someone with sound legal advice that would not otherwise be available to them, the satisfaction of positively helping someone address his or her legal needs is a rewarding and satisfying experience.

"I am currently the lead associate on behalf of a Mississippi death row inmate's habeas corpus proceedings in federal court, in which we recently completed an evidentiary hearing regarding sentencing-related issues. I am also working on a § 1983 claim on behalf of an injured Illinois inmate who suffered substantial injuries while performing his prison job. I am also the Senior Advisor to the ABA YLD's *Serving Our Seniors* program, through which ABA YLD affiliates will provide basic estate planning advice and assistance to low-income seniors during the upcoming bar year.

"I think my work in this area less as leading me toward a destination and more simply as a part of my journey as a lawyer. Regardless of my position in the law, pro bono and public interest work will always be a part of my practice.

"Although national in breadth, the Celebration provides an opportunity for local legal associations across the country to take the next step in their efforts to provide high-quality legal services to those living on the social margins."

ABA Pro Bono Committee

The guiding principles of the ABA Pro Bono Committee are to support local efforts and to assist in their growth and effectiveness by providing information, planning guides, resources, and consultation services. The legal needs of the poor are local issues, and although a nationwide program, "Celebrate Pro Bono" is intended to have a local focus and impact. Goals for the celebration include:

- recruiting more pro bono volunteers and increasing legal services to poor and vulnerable people,
- mobilizing community support for pro bono,
- fostering collaborative relationships, and
- recognizing the pro bono efforts of America's lawyers.

For more information, please visit www.probono.net/celebrateprobono.

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