

Small Wins Are Big Wins for Those Looking to Help Others and Gain Experience



"Pro bono" is the magic phrase that will help you conjure huge gains from a little experience sprinkled with lots of passion.

By **George J. Farrell** | **October 2, 2019** | **The Legal Intelligencer**

If you were born in Bleckley County, Georgia, in the late 1930s, there's a pretty good chance that your birth certificate has the wrong name on it.

I'm not from Bleckley County, or even Georgia, and I wasn't born in the 1930s. So, I was pretty dumbfounded when I received a client file on such a matter from Philadelphia VIP, an organization that matches low-income city residents facing civil legal issues with attorneys willing to lend some discrete pro bono hours. Like addressing a name change from decades ago, which most efficiently requires a lawyer.

Thus, my introduction to pro bono work as a new associate at a global law firm, and to the power of small wins.

They can have a profound impact on your practice, your community, your development and on a fellow human's life—big time. See, "pro bono" is the magic phrase that will help you conjure huge gains from a little experience sprinkled with lots of passion.

In law school, and since my early days at my firm, I've been advised to play to my strengths as I develop my practice. As a growing litigator, that means bringing my strong research and discovery skills to client matters at my firm. I also know as a one-time civil servant that there are things that only lawyers are

equipped to handle when it comes to wading through our somewhat labyrinthine legal system. And as a city resident, I care whether my neighbors can navigate that space, especially the clients served by Philadelphia VIP and other organizations—like the gentleman from Bleckley County. Pro bono work gives me the chance to sharpen my skills and civic contributions.

I may be luckier than most because my firm puts a premium on pro bono service and we have a great coordinator who guides us through the process. I do realize that there's sometimes a misconception that we, particularly as younger lawyers, can't afford to participate in pro bono matters.

Perhaps we tend to romanticize pro bono—equating it only to massive, life-or-death-precedent-setting cases, filled with countless hours, until the eventual big win. Maybe an interview with Stephen Colbert or a book deal afterward, too.

But like many things in life, it's the small win that proves impactful for most, particularly in a city with a nearly 25% poverty rate. Being able to help a single father hold onto his job or a non-English speaking woman launch a home-based business are some micro steps that address that macro statistic. And the warm-and-fuzzy point is knowing that you made a real difference for a real person—like an elderly transplant from Bleckley County.

Now, I don't know what was going on in the records department in Bleckley back then. Maybe the prothonotary had a rough decade down in Cochran, the county seat (expanded geography skills: plus). It was the Great Depression, after all. But I saw the effect this lifelong error was having on the 82-year-old client sent to me—like the inability to get something as simple and essential as a senior SEPTA pass, all because of a misrecorded name. And I knew my skills could help turn things around.

Being able to place a friendly face with a file is not something that comes up too often in corporate litigation. The change in scenery made my slashing through the joyful intricacies of motions practice in the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas—it was a mere 20 hours—more bearable. But for someone completely unfamiliar with the process, and unable to pay for that expertise, I don't know if there's an assignable figure.

I didn't quite realize that when I was at Temple Law, even when I spent a year researching municipal and state lead and landlord tenant laws, interviewing city officials from around the country on the topic. Sure, I helped author a report that made recommendations for how our city can improve its laws. It was even cited in the Inquirer's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Toxic City" series, and led me to testify before Mayor Jim Kenney. Back then, these issues appealed to me in a policy-wonky-humanitarian, yet still largely theoretical, way.

But when an emergency landlord-tenant pro bono case involving a mother and her toddler threatened with eviction landed in my email inbox, it woke me up in an actual way. Sure, they hadn't paid rent in a few months, but they also had a large hole in their ceiling and lead paint had been found throughout the home, presenting incredible danger to her son as well as violating numerous city ordinances. And I had the background and experience to impact their situation.

In short order, we got the eviction dismissed and brought the landlord and tenant back to speaking terms—on fixing the property and paying rent.

Bonus: I put what I had researched into practice. Super bonus: I still hit my hours.

It's nothing against those major pro bono cases that fill headlines. But taking on the matters I've encountered to date crystallizes what we, as lawyers, can do to make our world better. And should do. The small wins add up for everyday people in this city and elsewhere.

Maybe that's why I work so hard to make the time for new pro bono cases. Every engagement feels like a big win to me.

As a litigator, you have to love that.

Reprinted with permission from the October 2, 2019 edition of The Legal Intelligencer © 2019 ALM Media Properties, LLC. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited, contact 1.877.257.3382 or reprints@alm.com.

About the Author:

George J. Farrell is an associate in the government law and policy and litigation practices at Greenberg Traurig, as well as a just-named Committee of Seventy Buchholz Fellow.



George J. Farrell
farrellg@gtlaw.com