

Let Your Team Help You Conquer the Fear of the Pro Bono Unknown



Reprinted with permission from the October 21, 2020 edition of The Legal Intelligencer © 2020 ALM Media Properties, LLC. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited, contact 1.877.257.3382 or reprints@alm.com.

As we head toward National Pro Bono Week, we encourage all our fellow members of the bar to get involved—remember ABA Model Rule 6.1! We invite you to build a team to get there. Leveraging the power of many will lead you to different opportunities rather than sitting back to await a perfect match between your experience and the needs of a client in need.

By Robert W. Rubenstein and Joel Eads | [October 21, 2020](#) | The Legal Intelligencer

“What do we do?”

“I don’t know—yet.”

This was the back-and-forth during a juvenile resentencing trial in Ocala, Florida—not among junior lawyers, but among a team of experienced civil litigators navigating the case, pro bono.

Just 16 years old when arrested—now 42 years old—the client had been sentenced to life without parole. Suddenly new law entitled him to have his sentence reconsidered. That didn’t mean this assembly of seasoned lawyers knew the ins and outs of the applicable statutes. But even while weeding through unfamiliar territory, we got there. We also achieved justice for the client. And it was unusually exhilarating.

Every lawyer, at every level, no matter their discipline, should be as fortunate to have that kind of moment. And having a team to support, enhance, and magnify those opportunities and benefits, for you *and* the client, is what made the difference.

Not only will the collaboration and distribution of work help relieve commitment anxieties, but working with a team is also likely to enhance your relationship with your colleagues, and perhaps develop the breadth of your professional relationships outside your firm. That is what happened to us in Ocala.

As we head toward National Pro Bono Week, we encourage all our fellow members of the bar to get involved—remember ABA Model Rule 6.1! We invite you to build a team to get there. Leveraging the power of many will lead you to different opportunities rather than sitting back to await a perfect match between your experience and the needs of a client in need.

Resolve the Fears

Let's face it: Pro bono projects can trigger a common impediment among lawyers—our fear of the unknown. Pro bono efforts outside the scope of a lawyer's usual practice therefore have the tendency to be dismissed. Such snap decisions are, however, unfortunate, for the client and for you. Missed opportunities rob you of your chance to dive into a productive collection of thinkers on a matter. Your colleagues are smart, trained, and helpful. Band together. Even with unfamiliar subject matter, there is a remarkable feeling that comes from encountering the unknown with a trusted colleague.

Joy in Numbers

Pro bono work delivers, of course, its own obvious reward. But collaborating with different personalities, those who practice different types of law, perhaps in other firm offices or outside your firm entirely, can meaningfully enhance the experience. Not only are two heads almost always better than one, but also working in a team presents a unique opportunity to connect with peers with whom you may never otherwise have, develop a strategy resulting from the diverse team experiences, and execute a collective game plan within, or outside, the team member's expertise. The team support is unconditional. This is particularly true with pro bono matters, where the sense of the greater good is palpable. Our experience in Florida was that the entire team of lawyers, paralegals, administrative assistants, and other support staff became invested quickly and enthusiastically. And the different personalities and life experiences helped shape a defense in a way that almost certainly would not have emerged from any single lawyer.

Spreading the Work

The same efficiencies you strive for in your other legal matters apply to your pro bono cases as well, notching another plus for a team approach. Together, you can spread the work and alleviate many of the usual, internal impediments to undertaking a matter pro bono. Of course, you are busy, and other life obligations seem to occupy all other life moments. They always will. That's why a team can be just the answer. Knowing that you will not have to carry the representation all by yourself is likely to incentivize you to take the case in the first instance. And that is an unmitigated win for a pro bono client in need.

Construct Collegiality

Professionally, little else bonds you more to your colleagues than working closely on a matter. We have found that by building a team to tackle your pro bono effort, the feel-good overlay on top of the long hours enhances that bond. This collaboration, which otherwise might not ever occur, creates a perfect opportunity to work with that real estate or IP partner about whom you have heard good things, for example. The collaboration will help build trust internally, and those kinds of networks across practice groups multiply, and eventually can raise the overall sense of firm collegiality, not to mention your own career trajectory.

Gain Meaningful Experience

Finally, getting a team involved in pro bono reminds those in the legal profession why we chose it in the first place—to ensure access to justice, for all. In the end, that client in Ocala gained his release, admittedly because justice was served and not because the client's representation was flawless. The effort, though, along with the stakes and doubts, loomed large—which enhanced the payoff immeasurably, on all sides.

Particularly in these difficult times, with difficulties disproportionately falling upon people hanging on by the thinnest of margins, remember: we can help. Immediately and meaningfully.

Engage. Build your pro bono team. You will almost certainly be glad that you did.

About the Author:

Robert W. Rubenstein is a member of the corporate practice group and regularly assists financial institutions and other investment servicing providers in structuring and negotiating their servicing arrangements. **Joel Eads** is a seasoned commercial litigator. Both are based in the Philadelphia office of Greenberg Traurig.
