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CHICAGO LAWYER

Why go pro?: Eight Chicago lawyers say why they volunteer

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By Meg Benson

Meg Benson has worked for Chicago Volunteer Legal Services, the oldest pro bono organization in the country, for more than 30 years. As executive director, she coordinates the agency's bench, bar and law firm relations and directs its program management and funding. A family law litigator, she still handles minor guardianship and custody cases.

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February is dark, dreary and cold. Except around the middle of the month when flowers, light and love suddenly bloom. While the origins of Valentine's Day are obscure, it has grown from a day when lovers exchange notes and tokens of affection to a veritable industry. And that's OK because we need reminders that love abounds, especially in the gloomy days of winter.

For instance, a lot of lawyers love their work. Practicing law, although hard, provides a good service, offers a decent living and benefits society. What else makes our profession worthy of love? Your colleagues will tell you. Let them explain why pro bono puts some zing in their hearts.

"I love pro bono because of the personal relationships I build with my clients: I get to know their families, their joys and their struggles. I still get a holiday card from one pro bono client I helped a decade ago!" said Kirkland & Ellis partner Jordan M. Heinz.

"I love to volunteer and help families navigate challenging and emotional situations. Pro bono also allows me to gain valuable court experience and grow my skills and my practice faster than I would have been able to do on my own," said Nora Endzel of Endzel Law.

"I have always loved doing pro bono, but my reasons have evolved over my career. Initially, it provided crucial training and experience, but now I do it because of the societal impact. As attorneys, we have a monopoly on the ability to be paid to give advice and represent others in court. As a result, we have an obligation to do pro bono. The stakes are just too high for low-income clients. I am not comfortable allowing someone to become homeless just because he or she can't afford a lawyer. That shouldn't happen," said Quarles & Brady partner Steven V. Hunter.

"I have always made it a priority to use my career to help others. Practicing family law gives me that opportunity daily, but my pro bono service allows me to take it a step further. As a pro bono child representative, I love being a voice to children in contested family disputes," said Law Offices of Jonathan Merel partner Melissa Caballero.

"As a solo practitioner, I am keenly aware of how I spend my time. I love pro bono because, while it doesn't provide a paycheck, it profits me in other ways. As a new attorney, I gained an introduction to new practice areas. Nowadays, I advocate for clients who have no one else to turn to. I see my loved ones in those faces. When I fight for them, it makes me a more creative attorney and a better person," said Steve Raminiak of the Law Offices of Steve Raminiak in Arlington Heights.

"I love coming in and leveling the playing field, especially in situations where an opponent's plan to win is heavily dependent on the pro se litigant not having a decent attorney. It feels great to fight for the little guy and win," said Brion W. Doherty of Motherway & Napleton.

"I love pro bono work because it allows me and my colleagues to utilize skills we spent years developing to simply do something good for someone. We know we won't get payment in return — these clients are not in a position to return the favor. Lawyers have a reputation of being greedy — pro bono proves otherwise," said Jenner & Block partner Reena R. Bajowala.

“I love pro bono because it gives my practice a balance and keeps me grounded. I meet wonderful people that I wouldn’t otherwise encounter,” said Chico & Nunes partner Sandy L. Morris.

Why do you love pro bono?

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