

# The True Measure of an Associate: Helping Others in Need

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When dealing with long hours, billable hour requirements, phase and task codes (the worst), looming deadlines and interesting personalities, it is sometimes hard to remember that we in the private sector are extremely fortunate. As private practice associates, we are conditioned to work hard and focus on firm clients to ensure the firm remains profitable and successful. Despite these marching orders, we must not forget that as lawyers, we have an inherent obligation—now more than ever—to protect and help those who cannot on their own, to provide quality representation to those less fortunate, and simply, to do good.

It is easy to forget that electricity, food, shelter, the ability to work in a certain job, and even the right to enter this country, are not freely provided and may require legal aid. There may be a corrupt landlord threatening a low-income tenant, a person being discriminated against because of his race, age, sex, gender or sexual orientation, or an immigrant who desperately needs - advice and counsel on his rights in light of recent events. The list of persons in need goes on ad infinitum. The ultimate question is, what are you going to do to help someone feel as safe and welcomed as you do living in your town or city?

Whether pro bono work is promoted at your firm or you have to take the initiative on your own, giving back to your community is critical. It is far too easy to live within the safe walls of our private practice life. Of course, as an associate, you, like all of us working our way up the ranks of law firm life, are busy (at least I hope you are). Doing pro bono work does not mean foregoing other opportunities, it means giving some extra time to benefit someone in need. Even if your firm does not give you hours credit for pro bono work (which all firms should), there are countless benefits to participating in pro bono work.

## **Truly Help People**

Not everyone has the ability or opportunity to reach the success we as private sector associates have. Now don't get me wrong, I am certainly not saying that it has been (or will be) an easy career path, but the likelihood is that if you are reading this, you have had some modicum of success. With some exception, the common layperson simply does not understand the law the way we do. That is not because they are not as smart, but because the law requires training to - understand and interpret.

Indeed, so complicated, nuanced, and ever evolving is the law that lawyers are not immune from its misapplication. How then can we trained lawyers expect those without any legal training whatsoever to understand their rights and duties when faced with a dispute? By actively - participating in pro bono work, you are making a real difference for someone in need. There is no better reward than making people see the good the law can do instead of the bad (that is so often the subject of media fodder).

## **Gain Invaluable Practice**

As a private sector associate, you are hopefully growing and learning as a lawyer through writing assignments, taking depositions, client interaction and courtroom appearances. Yet, as with any law firm (particularly larger law firms), it takes time to earn the privilege of being tasked with more responsibility. Indeed, it may be years before you give your name at a deposition before asking questions or see the inside of a courtroom. This, of course, makes sense because your firm has to trust in your abilities as a lawyer before letting you handle a client matter on your own.

So if you do not have the opportunity just yet to take depositions, interact with clients, or go to court, how do you develop those skills in the interim? The best answer is to take on a pro bono case. In doing so, there is no more formal hierarchy on the case (the norm in law firms). Rather, depending on the nature and scope of the case, you will likely be handling it alone or maybe with one or two other lawyers in your office. This means that you will be conducting the initial client interview, evaluating claims and/or defenses, handling depositions, briefing and court appearances. Gaining this experience is not the reason to take on pro bono, but it is certainly an added benefit of doing so.

## **Broaden Your Legal Knowledge**

For those of us whose practice generally involves big businesses, pro bono opportunities rarely reflect our usual caseload. For others, this may not be the case. Regardless, an additional benefit of pro bono work to you as an associate is that you may get assigned a case in a field outside your norm. While this may seem like a daunting prospect, it should be viewed as a learning experience and a time to expand your knowledge-base.

For example, I once took on an asylum case with no prior experience with immigration law. In the end, I was able to help my client successfully obtain asylum because I spent time learning about immigration law and how to maneuver the amazingly complicated and technical immigration rules. This would not have been possible without taking the extra initiative. As private sector associates, we are naturally motivated—this motivation should not diminish simply because you are handling a pro bono case.

Pro bono lies at the heart of our profession. Talk to your pro bono coordinator today to find a pro bono opportunity in your area. If your firm does not have a pro bono coordinator, a simple Google search will reveal countless organizations in and around your area desperately seeking associates, like you, willing, ready and able to help. Do not let your career be dictated solely by how much money you make and how many hours you bill in a given year. Instead, be a role model for your fellow associates (and other attorneys you work with) by helping others. Only by ensuring fairness in the law for those who are not in a position to understand it will you truly thrive and grow as an associate. •

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