

ATJ PRO BONO CHAMPION



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Jones Day, Dallas

What type of pro bono work are you involved in?

I have done a range of pro bono work throughout my legal career. As a transactional lawyer, I have had the opportunity to assist many nonprofit corporations obtain their tax-exempt status, assist them with contract matters, complete mergers with other nonprofits, and provide general corporate governance advice. A few examples of recent nonprofit clients include: The Bridge, a homeless shelter and recovery center in Dallas; LaunchAbility and the LaunchAbility Foundation, organizations that help children and adults with developmental disabilities achieve their maximum potential; Rainbow Days, an organization that prepares underprivileged children to live lives of hope and promise; and Vickery Meadow Learning Center, an organization that teaches English to adults and children in low-income and diverse neighborhoods in Dallas.

I also work with the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program (DVAP is a joint program between the Dallas Bar Association and Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas) to staff neighborhood legal clinics and take DVAP cases. I generally handle simple divorces, but I have represented DVAP clients in probate matters, adoptions, and child support/custody matters. I also serve on the board of a number of nonprofits, including Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas and Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Greater Dallas.

What is the most rewarding part of your pro bono efforts?

I am the public service coordinator at Jones Day Dallas. In that capacity, I help other lawyers identify pro bono opportunities and assist and supervise them with their pro bono cases. It is gratifying to see young lawyers take their first pro bono case and get hooked on doing pro bono work. Young lawyers learn quickly that it does not take much of their time to change the life of a pro bono client. Pro bono clients truly appreciate what you do for them and express their gratitude with tears and hugs—something we generally don't get from our paying clients. I thoroughly enjoy working with new lawyers and introducing them to the rewards of pro bono work.

My goal and hope is that I have and can continue to inspire other lawyers to do pro bono work so that together we can ensure that those less fortunate in our community have access to our justice system.

You have taken hundreds of pro bono cases. What made you start doing pro bono work? What was your first case?

I started taking pro bono cases right out of law school in 1986. I have always believed that lawyers have a professional and ethical duty to the community to help those less fortunate in a way that only we, as lawyers, can. As lawyers we hold the keys to the courthouse and it is our responsibility to ensure that everyone has access to our courts. My first pro bono case came through what is now DVAP. I volunteered to represent a young mother in a divorce, child support, and custody case. Even though I was assured that the case would be uncontested, it did not turn out that way. The young husband threatened my client with physical violence and threatened to take their two-year-old son out of the state. Fortunately, I had an experienced family lawyer who was willing to mentor me through the case. I quickly learned how to get a protective order and temporary restraining order. I then faced opposing counsel who argued for custody and against paying child support. In the end, my client was successful in getting the divorce, custody of her son, and child support. I use that case as an example to other lawyers who are afraid that they will not be able to handle a pro bono case. I tell them, "If I can do it, you can do it." After all, I am a transactional lawyer—I had to ask directions to the courthouse!

What advice would you give another attorney who has never taken a pro bono case?

I would encourage all lawyers to take at least one pro bono case. I suggest that they try to find a case in their area of expertise (e.g., a real estate lawyer taking a case involving property; a family law lawyer taking a divorce case; a transactional lawyer taking a case involving a contract dispute or a nonprofit corporation; a litigator taking a consumer case). If a lawyer is willing to take a case outside of his area of expertise, I suggest that he start with something simple and find a mentor to help guide him through the case. Many attorneys in our community are willing to mentor volunteer lawyers. Once a volunteer lawyer realizes the impact he can have on the life of a pro bono client, the lawyer will hopefully be inspired to take additional cases. There is nothing more rewarding than helping someone who would not otherwise have been able to help himself.