

Pro Bono Week Forges Connections: Connecting Needs with Passions Leads to Engagement

By Dan Garner of Hunton & Williams – It is a pleasure practicing law with a firm where helping people and charitable organizations who can't afford a lawyer is part of the job description.

For the past six years, 100 percent of our full-time U.S. lawyers have done pro bono work and more



Dan Garner

than 50,000 hours were dedicated to low income and charitable clients in each of the last three years. While statistics help us measure how we are doing as a firm that values pro bono service, our mission – helping those without means – is best achieved when lawyers are matched with clients whose needs and causes fit their talents and passions. Those connections result in real engagement.

With an office full of great lawyers, interests and skills are wide and varied. When those lawyers are also great people, it's just a matter of helping them connect with needs where their skills, interests and passions lead them to serve. That's the job – connecting lawyers with needs.

One of the ways we help forge connections is Pro Bono Week, observed annually in our Dallas office. PBW is a weeklong promotion celebrating Hunton's tradition of Pro Bono Service For the Public Good.

I like it. It's good to purposefully highlight and celebrate "family traditions". PBW allows us to spotlight and appreciate area and state charitable organizations that serve our neighbors and improve our community. It introduces a broad array of needs to a bunch of good lawyers. We hope that connections will be made,

lawyers will engage and good things will happen. Again this year, our hopes came true.

PBW 2015, celebrated earlier this month, brought leaders from select organizations to join us for daily luncheon programs, informing us about their work and how we might help them or the people they serve. Some included focused CLE training, to ready us for service.

We kicked off the week with an in-house presentation about the Dallas Bar's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program, presented by one of our tax lawyers.

Tuesday followed with Counseling the Micro-entrepreneur, presented by Texas C-BAR (Texas Community Building with Attorney Resources), a state-wide non-profit organization headquartered in Austin, training us to staff one of their Microbusiness Legal Clinics (about that, more later).

Next was the Housing Crisis Center, a project of Legal Aid of Northwest Texas. Maryann D'Aniello, attorney-coordinator of this service, informed us about the urgent need for lawyers to counsel low-income people in the midst of a housing crisis, typically involving a landlord, and presented an excellent CLE training entitled, Landlord/Tenant Law: A Primer for the Volunteer Attorney, which prepares interested attorneys to serve.

On Thursday, we were joined by Texas Appleseed, an Austin-based non-profit promoting social and economic justice for the most vulnerable by leveraging the skills and resources of volunteer lawyers to identify practical solutions to difficult, systemic problems. Deborah Fowler, their Executive Director, informed us about a their current initiatives and Gabriella McDonald, Pro Bono & New Projects Director, outlined a variety of needs for help. >

SERVING BUSINESS LAWYERS IN TEXAS

Finally, our guest on Friday was CitySquare, one of Dallas' leading agencies serving and addressing the needs of those in poverty. President John Siburt presented an impressive lineup of services and initiatives, and General Counsel Ken Koonce identified specific needs for pro bono legal support.



Each program attracted robust attendance, from junior associates to senior partners. All came away with a greater understanding of our guest agencies, the people and causes they serve and their needs for pro bono legal support. Many were inspired for a greater sense of engagement and service. Connections were made. Lawyers engaged. Good things happened.

And good things are continuing to happen.

One of our tax lawyers will lead income tax preparation clinics in March, helping low income people prepare and file their income tax returns.

Twenty-nine of our lawyers provided lawyer staffing for a Microbusiness Legal Clinic in Dallas. The Microbusiness Clinic is a project of Texas C-BAR and Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, focused on promoting the advancement of small businesses as a foundation of community economic development. It provides the opportunity for low income small business owners – who otherwise would not be able to afford the services of a business lawyer – to sit down with lawyers to discuss issues, problems or aspirations relating to their existing or soon-to-be started small business enterprise.

An enthusiastic group of lawyers from diverse practice groups was inspired to help staff legal clinics at the Housing Crisis Center, to help low income people address urgent landlord/tenant problems.

A young lawyer volunteered to help Texas Appleaseed with foundational research in support of a project addressing civil forfeiture abuses in Texas. Learning more about the need, a partner volunteered to join in as well.

A litigator and his colleagues are teaming with CitySquare to provide publication-attorney staffing for the civil portion of Special Juvenile Immigrant Status cases, helping refugee children who qualify for relief.

It is encouraging to receive the impressions of my colleagues. These comments from lawyers who staffed the Microbusiness Legal Clinic are typical:

- “Participating in the Microbusiness Clinic was an extremely rewarding experience. It was particularly enjoyable to work with individuals who are attempting to better their lives by starting new business ventures that will benefit their families and the community at large. The clinic was also a great opportunity for a transactional attorney to provide pro bono services...” – *partner Mark Vowell*
- “As a young attorney still learning the ins and outs of the everyday practice of law, the Microbusiness Legal Clinic is an example of what being a lawyer is all about. Working with actual community members on a business idea (or in my case, an actual business – a boutique events planning company) – and collaborating with my attorney teammate on the legal issues involved was exhilarating and >

SERVING BUSINESS LAWYERS IN TEXAS

a great reminder of both the privilege of being a lawyer and the benefit we can provide to those in the community.” – *associate Lindsay Kirton*

- “I’m glad we were able to support such a great cause and were able to help dozens of individuals with a myriad of legal issues for their microbusinesses. These folks often don’t know what their first step should be, and we are able to help point them in the right direction as they begin their business careers or navigate legal issues that have arisen.” – *partner Ben Browder*



While the connections and engagements from PBW 2015 are exciting, it is even more exciting to imagine the good things that could happen as a result: A timely income tax refund enables a person to pay their rent on time or fund their

child to participate in an enrichment program. Sound business counseling enables a good decision or informs a well-calculated risk, enhancing one’s business success. Advice to a client helps solve an urgent landlord/tenant problem or address a wrong. A quality legal research product enables systemic changes in our laws to prevent civil forfeiture abuse. A publication-attorney helps ensure compliance with laws while a child finds stability.

Perhaps most exciting is knowing that these connections and engagements and testaments are just part of it. Others are ongoing or in the works. I look forward to yet another year of 100% pro bono participation and continuing to help connect the talents and passions of our lawyers to engage as advocates for our neighbors in need.

Dan Garner is a partner in Hunton & William’s Dallas office and the regional co-chair of pro bono for the firm’s Texas offices.

Please visit www.texaslawbook.net for more articles on business law in Texas.