

Pro Bono – Law Firms

Nixon Peabody: A Firm Committed To Improving The Lives Of Others

The Editor interviews John F. Bolton, Jon Greenbaum and Stacey B. Slater, Nixon Peabody LLP.

Editor: Would each of you tell us something about your background?

Slater: I came to Nixon Peabody directly from law school and practiced in the firm's business litigation group. In addition to general commercial litigation, I handled a considerable volume of pro bono litigation, with a particular emphasis on political asylum cases. I was appointed the firm's pro bono partner in September of last year.

Greenbaum: I had my own firm prior to joining Nixon Peabody and was attracted to the firm by its big-firm platform and the quality, both personal and professional, of the people here. I am a partner in the labor and employment law group and the pro bono partner for the DC office.

Bolton: I am a partner in the firm's business litigation group, with a particular emphasis on healthcare litigation, including a variety of Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement issues, and serve as the Long Island office's pro bono partner.

Editor: Each of you has had something of a career in the pro bono arena. For starters would you tell us about the pro bono culture at Nixon Peabody?

Slater: Pro bono service has a great deal of support from the firm's leadership. Many of us believe that every individual is entitled to legal representation irrespective of their ability to pay for it, and that every lawyer has an ethical obligation to devote at least some of their time to meeting this need.

To further foster the pro bono culture, the firm has taken a number of steps. We give billable credit to our lawyers for their pro bono work. Pro bono service is a separate category in end-of-the-year evaluations for both partners and associates, and it is also a separate line item in each attorney's business plan. Each practice group has a pro bono liaison to encourage participation within each group.

Editor: And, of course, you have been appointed the firm's first full-time pro bono partner. What led to that step?

Slater: I knew that the firm was committed to its pro bono initiative as I had been involved with the firm's pro bono efforts for a considerable time. When I proposed the idea of a full-time pro bono partner to Harry Trueheart, the firm's Chairman, and the management committee, it was warmly received. I believe it says a lot about the firm's commitment to pro bono that it hired me, as a partner, in this role.

Bolton: While the firm has a long history of pro bono service, its commitment has evolved rapidly in recent years. My experience indicates that the appointment of Stacey Slater as pro bono partner reflects a new level of commitment and a transition from an ad hoc pro bono program to one that is dedicated to making available as many opportunities as possible to our lawyers, to bringing into the program as



John F. Bolton



Jon Greenbaum



Stacey B. Slater

many participants as possible and to having as great an impact as possible. The increase of pro bono hours from year to year is clear evidence of this transition. Managing it, I think, now requires someone of Stacey's caliber and standing in the firm.

Greenbaum: Certainly in the DC office, and I think across the firm as a whole, there is a recognition that pro bono legal work – to which I would append community service as well – has become a firm priority.

Editor: Does the program have any particular themes, such as political asylum cases or representation of the indigent in criminal matters?

Slater: Several of our offices have handled important asylum cases. We won asylum on behalf of people fleeing persecution in Gambia, Tibet, Iraq, Sudan, the Congo and Zambia, and I am now representing a woman from Ecuador who was the victim of severe domestic violence. But we do not limit our focus to any one area. We have assisted countless non-profit organizations with incorporating and obtaining tax exemption, and have done legal work on behalf of the homeless, indigent tenants, clients who were denied social security benefits and victims of domestic violence, amongst others.

Bolton: Once you have some success in a given area – and asylum cases appear to fall under that heading for our program – the cases seem to come your way. We recently secured asylum for an Iraqi who had provided translation services for our forces. As a result of that association with the coalition forces, he was harassed and threatened, and eventually one of his family members was killed. Our client was a Shiite. As such, he viewed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein as a liberating event, and he went on to offer his translation abilities – he had been at Tuskegee University in Alabama – to the coalition forces. He was then targeted by various insurgent groups as a visual symbol of those willing to help the Americans. He was threatened, his car was destroyed, his house shot up and, finally, his brother, living with him at the time, had the misfortune to answer a knock on the door at night and was shot to death. Our client held a position in the Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture and was able to obtain a short-term visa to the U.S. Once here, he filed for asylum. This past January we were successful in obtaining asylum for him, and he is now able to bring his family here.

Editor: These are high profile cases. The firm has also been involved in a variety of Hurricane Katrina relief matters that have not received much publicity but which have done a great deal of good.

Greenbaum: Through our DC office, the firm's syndication group held a series of seminars across the country dealing with the passage of legislation to provide tax credits for the reconstruction and restoration of historic buildings in New Orleans. The DC Bar Association has an initiative to maintain the stock of affordable housing here in the District, and our office has been one of the leaders in that effort. Accordingly, we have expertise in this area that has been of great value in Hurricane Katrina relief. The legislation in question has now been largely passed, and our group is working with a variety of organizations engaged in trying to implement it.

Editor: Finding appropriate pro bono projects for transactional lawyers has always been more difficult than coming up with litigation opportunities. It appears that you are doing pretty well in this regard.

Greenbaum: There are transactional lawyers who are willing to take on litigation projects – we have a patent lawyer who is working with a musician on patenting and licensing an invention for an acoustic guitar, and the matter is essentially litigation – but, all things considered, involving the non-litigators in many of these undertakings remains a challenge.

Slater: This is one area on which we are very focused. We have organized micro-entrepreneurship programs in several of our offices through which we offer free legal business assistance to low-income entrepreneurs in underserved communities. This is a way in which business, intellectual property, real estate, employment and other non-litigators are able to utilize their legal skills and participate in the program. The needs are very great. These businesspeople are desperate for the kinds of support that we are in a position to provide, and in helping them, we are helping populations that have often been left behind. This work is as important, and as fulfilling, as the high profile matters we handle in the litigation arena.

Editor: Would you share with us your thoughts about this kind of work and firm morale?

Slater: Pro bono work greatly enhances

lawyers' morale and job satisfaction. Through pro bono work, our lawyers feel they can really make a difference in individuals' lives – give them an access to justice that they likely would not otherwise have. Also, it gives our young lawyers great hands-on experience and increased responsibility that they might not otherwise get so early on. Feeling good about themselves, they feel good about the firm, and it is that job satisfaction that makes Nixon Peabody such an attractive place to be. In helping others, we are helping ourselves.

Greenbaum: Pro bono is also a way in which to bring people together from across a wide range of practice areas and different firm offices. The DC office has an all-attorney lunch each month, and one of the items on the agenda is our pro bono undertakings. It is a way of enlisting people from varied professional backgrounds and interests in these projects, and it helps to build a more cohesive and collegial firm. That, too, serves firm morale.

Editor: Have you been able to partner with firm clients in any of these undertakings?

Bolton: Partnering with clients, and specifically with in-house counsel, is an important theme in Nixon Peabody's pro bono program. Our Long Island office, for example, teams with Computer Associates' in-house lawyers on a variety of political asylum issues. It is a wonderful opportunity from a variety of perspectives. It brings firm lawyers and their counterparts at CA together on matters that they have not worked together on in the past, and that serves to strengthen relationships and enhance professional bonds. It serves to introduce each side of the equation to a wider range of resources – both in terms of expertise and personnel. And, most importantly, it focuses those resources in such a way as to accomplish some very positive results.

Editor: How about the personal rewards that derive from pro bono service?

Slater: Pro bono service is a plus from every perspective, but I do not think that anything outstrips the personal rewards that derive from having affected social change for the better, or having made a difference in someone's life – whether it be helping a refugee to win asylum after having been threatened in his own country or protecting a woman or child from a life of abuse. These opportunities are among the greatest privileges of our profession, and the personal rewards are humbling.

Bolton: Lawyers, and particularly those who work in a large-firm setting, have many advantages. Most of us recognize that education, hard work and perhaps a little luck have come together to provide us with a wonderful professional platform on which to display our talents. To devote at least some of those talents to help others who have not been as fortunate as we are is an acknowledgement of our good fortune and our gratitude for the advantages we experience.

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