

Make Someone a King in the Law

“I’m just poor boy, but today you make me king in the law!” That broken-English blessing came earlier this year from a pro bono client who is an El Salvadoran national seeking political asylum in the United States. Our firm helped him obtain a legal Employment Authorization Document from U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services while his asylum application is pending, and assisted him in securing General Assistance through the county of San Francisco to supplement the income he is able to earn with his EAD, preventing him from homelessness.

Our client’s triumphant proclamation of self-esteem made my heart soar. It quite honestly was a simple matter, but his reaction actually made me feel like a king. Perhaps it was the general satisfaction of enabling an earnest man to work legally in this country, who is trying to provide for himself while seeking the permanent protection of our laws. But I think it had more to do with the human connection. The exchange of compassion and gratitude between two souls. The mutual recognition that the law had been exercised for the accomplishment of social justice.

It’s moments like those I live for in the practice of law. I’ve been fortunate enough to play a small role in some significant victories for corporate clients in civil litigation matters. But the experiences I cherish most are those moments of connection with pro bono clients - fellow brothers and sisters in need who are moved in an emotional way

by the kindness of professionals willing to give time to help solve their problems and who, in turn, move us with their expressions of heartfelt gratitude.

On a fundamental level (proverbial “bloodsuckers” aside), most attorneys are probably attracted to the legal profession because they enjoy helping others solve problems. But I’ve found in my own experience it is easy to get caught up in stressful business litigation or to otherwise act selfishly with my time, such that I neglect to direct any problem-solving energy towards people who are indigent and need access to justice. On the occasions I have, the emotional rewards have humbled me. And I wonder how often I’ve missed opportunities to help people feel like “kings and queens in the law” by failing to reach out and get involved in available pro bono opportunities.

Pro bono is one of those things for which you think you don’t have any time, and then once you try it, you wonder how you ever survived without it as a priority in your schedule. Particularly in difficult economic times, the opportunities for pro bono service multiply, as perhaps does the margin in our schedules to serve. And given the State Bar’s hortatory requirement of 50 hours per year of pro bono service, we should all be searching for ways to serve that are meaningful to us anyway.

The genuine outpouring of thanks from grateful pro bono clients you do take the time to assist is worth far more than the value of your billable time itself. My colleague, Joanna Frazier, and I recently helped an

80-year-old immigrant woman negotiate a very favorable deal with the landlord of her un-heated, cockroach-infested apartment, after the landlord had been verbally abusive and intimidating to her. Our client and her daughter almost would not let us leave the courthouse amidst their continuous hugs and kisses of thanks. And the daughter’s fiancée continued insisting through tear-filled eyes that we take his phone number so he could assist us as a volunteer translator in future pro bono matters. It was another reminder how a few hours of our time as attorneys can make a massive positive difference in the lives of families all over our own communities.

The rigors of practicing law can many times be like eating your vegetables, but pro bono service is the dessert of our profession. Most of our firms and offices obviously run on the necessary vegetables of the billable hour. But don’t forget to enjoy your dessert. In fact, don’t be afraid to pursue dessert first when at all possible in your career. Volunteer at a legal clinic, or help a family adopt a child. Use your skills for someone less fortunate. Make someone in need a “king in the law.” The priceless memories just may leave you feeling like royalty yourself.\

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