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Pro Bono – Law Firms

Pro Bono: An Unequivocal Institutional Commitment

The Editor interviews Steven H. Schulman, Partner, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP.

Editor: As leader of Akin Gump's pro bono practice, what factors led you in the direction of public interest law?

Schulman: While at Northwestern Law School, I was involved in a legal clinic for disabled children. However, while I knew that pro bono would be part of my practice, I always assumed that I would work in the for-profit sector. I graduated in 1994, but did not take my first substantial pro bono matter until 1998, when I agreed to take an asylum case for a Nigerian family. The father was the direct client who had been working for a pro-democracy candidate in Nigeria, had been arrested and eventually fled to the U.S. I received the case less than two months before the immigration court hearing. Notwithstanding the short time, we won asylum in a contested hearing in an immigration court in Arlington, Virginia. This was an experience that turned my career around. From that time on I started to supervise more cases, taking on more asylum work and later managing the pro bono practice as the firm's first firm-wide pro bono counsel at Latham & Watkins. I am lucky to have been given the opportunity to head the pro bono practice at Akin Gump; I joined the firm in August 2006 as our first firm-wide full-time pro bono partner.

Editor: Do you spend all of your time on pro bono matters?

Schulman: Yes, all my time is devoted to our pro bono practice, divided into three areas. One is internal firm pro bono management. We recently had our first firm-



Steven H. Schulman

wide annual pro bono awards, which along with recruiting, answering surveys and doing interviews requires a great deal of time. The second part of my practice is pro bono business development, a big part of my job, which really adds value in thinking strategically about what we want to be involved in as far as large initiatives are concerned, thinking about matters that will make a difference and will be good experiences for the attorneys in the firm. My third task is working on individual pro bono matters.

Editor: Do you work through nonprofit legal organizations or do you work on cases brought directly to the firm by your lawyers?

Schulman: We tend to rely on individual

legal services organizations that refer cases to us — which is a great service to us. They are experts in the field and can screen the cases, providing us with mentoring and advice on their matters. Occasionally, there are cases where someone comes directly to us with an individual matter. I tend to shy away from those cases that have not been screened by experts in the field.

Notwithstanding this general rule, one of the sources that does not fit this model is the work we have done with our client KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), a large national non-profit charter school organization. Sandy Kress, my partner in our Austin office, knew the founders of KIPP and suggested I contact them to discuss a potential relationship. We have developed KIPP into a substantial client. We have been working in their operations for some time in Dallas, Austin, Houston, San Antonio, Los Angeles and New York, and we are exploring working in their Philadelphia and Washington operations. We also advise them nationally.

Editor: Would you mention some of the organizations that you work with?

Schulman: All over the country we have different organizations that we have strong relationships with. Bruce McLean, our chairman, serves on the board of Neighborhood Legal Services. Another example is the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program (DVAP), a program sponsored by the Dallas Bar. In Houston my partner Ann Stephens is on the Houston Volunteer Lawyer Project (HVLP) board. In Los Angeles we work with the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles and Public Counsel, both of which are great organizations. In New York we do a lot of work with the Legal Aid Society. In Wash-

Please email the interviewee at sschulman@akingump.com with questions about this interview.

ington we have many partners. The one that I am closest to is Human Rights First, which refers asylum cases to us. With some of these partnerships we try to help them with their internal organization needs, serving as employment counsel or giving strategic legal advice.

Our legislative attorneys have made a substantial commitment to pro bono. We do work with organizations like the U.S. Coalition for Child Survival and the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise ("NCNE"), helping them with anti-violence programs in inner-city schools. We helped NCNE lobby the D.C. government to get anti-gang programs in two schools.

Editor: Akin Gump has a time-honored commitment to pro bono. Please explain how this all came about.

Schulman: Our dedication to pro bono began with the founders of the firm, Bob Strauss and Dick Gump, who had both served in the FBI. Bob's laurels are myriad, given the many capacities in which he has served his country. Both lawyers always had a real sense of and commitment to public duty, which has infused the firm in many different ways. What sets us apart is our commitment to pro bono and public service in general. Having people serve in government and on public boards sends a message that you are much more than a law firm lawyer when you are at Akin Gump.

Editor: What requirements do you place on your lawyers in terms of pro bono hours and types of activities?

Schulman: We are a signatory to the Pro Bono Institute's Law Firm Pro Bono Challenge. We have committed to have an average of 60 pro bono hours per lawyer per year. This year we are on pace to exceed that commitment. In some years some lawyers do substantially more hours while in other years some lawyers are unable to meet that goal. In managing a pro bono practice I do not expect every lawyer to do 60 hours per year because some cases require lawyers to put in substantially more hours. For example, my partner Andy Rossman in New York has spent hundreds of hours on a case, *Lopez-Torrez v. New York State Board of Elections*, which he has taken all the way to the Supreme Court. It is a dispute over the way that New York selects and nominates its judges.

Editor: What types of training programs do you have for new associates or lateral hires?

Schulman: We encourage our attorneys to go to outside training courses and also do internal firm-wide training. This year I have trained attorneys to work on asylum cases and on issues relating to military personnel and their families. We also just had a session on working with charter schools.

Editor: Do you have the same responsiveness and commitment to pro bono in all of your offices? How do you inculcate this culture throughout the firm?

Schulman: Our hours are not entirely even across the offices, reflecting in part the culture and opportunities in different offices. For example, in Houston there are not as many public interest agencies as in Washington. Therefore, they do not always have the same opportunities. So far we have had a great response from attorneys all over the firm. In terms of inculcating a culture, we work on areas of expertise across the firm, like refugee matters and human rights, working with charter schools, etc. One of the reasons why KIPP is such a great client for us is that they have schools in the cities where we have offices. Our lawyers work on similar projects, developing a group of people working with charter schools across the firm. That way, we are not always relying on one office to do pro bono on its own. We work as one firm, as we do for our commercial clients.

Editor: Are projects tailored to the interests of individual offices?

Schulman: All pro bono starts locally. There is no doubt that every one of our offices has programs like DVAP where we work directly with people in the community. That is crucial for us. On the other hand, we are a large international law firm and can bring certain expertise to problems that need a national or international law firm's expertise.

We are sending a lawyer in September to Rwanda to help train lawyers on commercial law. That is a great thing.

Editor: What yardsticks do you use to measure outcomes?

Schulman: From my point of view hours are just a baseline consideration. What we really look for is success and positive outcomes in any legal problem – just like with our commercial clients – whether it is getting asylum for a client or negotiating a deal. If the client is happy with the outcome, the hours do not matter as much. Whether it is our lawyer's work in Rwanda or having our lawyers go to a homeless shelter to do a

clinic, I would like to have everyone involved in some way in pro bono practice.

Editor: You have done considerable service on the part of children and immigrants generally. Would you share some of your experiences? Also, please describe other outstanding accomplishments by your lawyers.

Schulman: Those closest to my heart are refugees. This week I found out that one of my clients, who is seeking asylum and was detained for nearly two and a half years in a detention center in Elizabeth, New Jersey, will be released. That is why I became a lawyer. That is to me the greatest mark of success.

This summer we worked with immigrant women, who had been abused by their husbands, to get them U.S. permanent residency. The Violence Against Women Act includes a provision that allows immigrant women to leave their spouses without losing their opportunity to obtain permanent residency. What gives me the most hope and makes me so optimistic about our pro bono practice is that more than 100 summer associates across the firm participated in this project. The reviews I received were that it was the highlight of the summer for many of these law students. To me the fact that we are bringing in a whole new generation of lawyers who are going to be committed to pro bono work makes me very optimistic about our future.

Editor: Why do you feel it is incumbent on the legal profession to take such an active role in giving of their gifts and time to their communities and the most needy?

Schulman: There is no doubt that our legal system is complicated. Without access to lawyers, people cannot access justice for some of the most basic things. For instance, my partner, John Jacob, last week secured for a homeless man several hundred dollars because his clothes were ruined in a storage facility. There is no way that this man would be able to negotiate with the company to get compensation for what he lost. That is one of many examples of attorneys in our pro bono practice making a real difference for people who cannot get for themselves just outcomes without legal training. We lawyers make our living because there is a justice system. If it erodes, our ability to make a living is going to erode too. It is our duty and in our own self-interest to make sure that our legal system is working and that people have faith in the legal system. That can only be done by making sure that everyone who needs legal assistance is able to get it.