

Pro Bono Firm Of 2013: Akin Gump

By **Drew Singer**

Law360, New York (August 26, 2013, 5:58 PM ET) -- After Amissa Moshi's front teeth were knocked out of her mouth during the attack, she knew each day in Burundi could be the day that she died. Moshi's father worked for a political party, the men who attacked her and her sister worked for the competition.

After fleeing from the African nation and traveling to Mexico, the 22-year-old reached the Mexican-American border by bus, without the means to provide for herself or her children and certainly without the money to hire an immigration lawyer. Enter Michelle Reed of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP, one of Law360's Pro Bono Firms of the Year.

"Before I could call anyone for help, Michelle called me first," Moshi told Law360 on Monday. "My life has changed from the day I met her. She made everything OK."

At no charge, Reed helped Moshi obtain political asylum in a Dallas immigration court. The law firm also paid to have her teeth fixed, helped her get a high school diploma, find health care and get a job. She's now working on her college degree.

"My life is better, I'm so grateful," Moshi said. "I think she's a great lawyer and a nice person."

At her day job, Reed specializes in representing companies and their leaders in securities litigation and regulatory investigations. But when she works for free, Reed is a member of the largest practice group in the law firm: Nearly 700 Akin Gump attorneys worked on pro bono projects this past year without any requirement to do so. In the last 12 months, the firm says its American attorneys averaged 93 hours of volunteer work per person.

"When I started working as a lawyer, I was working a lot," Reed said. "I paused, and decided I needed to make provisions to help people who otherwise wouldn't be able to get the services they needed. Honestly, it is what propels me forward into my practice, because these are the people who need access to justice."

Separating her securities litigation from her pro bono work is literally the difference between night and day, she said. Reed sometimes finds herself working on asylum applications at ungodly hours of the evening

"I always maintain at least one pro bono matter, sometimes it's not necessarily at the hour of the day that I want it to be, because I'm still busy with my other work, so I'm working on asylum applications at 2 a.m. I guess that was the commitment I made at the very beginning of my practice," she said. "Usually I get sweet-talked into doing things, people know I can't say no to a really compelling case."

But the firm's largest practice group is also its smallest. Steve Schulman, Akin Gump's first-ever pro bono partner, is its only full-time employee.

"The firm cares because the lawyers all care about it," Schulman said. "I think the best lawyers and the people who really enjoy being lawyers want to be the people who know the rules to the game and who help people out. We want to be the people who know what's going on, who give the advice, who help lead the people to the right solution."

Since Akin Gump hired Schulman in 2006, the firm's pro bono hours per lawyer have increased by 145 percent. Schulman credits that to a snowball effect.

"The nice thing about being known as a firm that values pro bono work is people start thinking in an entrepreneurial way," he said. "A lot of my colleagues will come to me with ideas when they wouldn't have done that five, six, seven years ago."

Among its most visible victories is a 2013 win in a Dallas federal courtroom that allowed a religious organization to continue feeding the city's homeless. In a decision that ended six years of litigation between the city and two ministries, U.S. District Judge Jorge Solis found that the city's food ordinance violated the Texas Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

But the most noteworthy pro bono victory Akin Gump litigated this past year was *Yousuf v. Samantar*, a case that required the work of nearly two dozen Akin Gump attorneys. In the case, before the Fourth Circuit, Akin Gump represented four Somalians against the second-most powerful man in the regime of former dictator Siad Barre, the firm says.

General Ali Samantar admitted to extrajudicial killing, torture, war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by troops under his command, but claimed absolute immunity against Akin Gump's clients because he was a former head of state acting in his official capacity on behalf of a foreign government.

The appeals court ruled that Samantar was not immune from the suit and awarded the firm's clients a \$21 million judgment.

"The the truth is, what great law firms do is work on great matters, whether they're billable or not," Schulman said.

Because the firm's culture involves lawyers pitching their own pro bono ideas, Akin Gump's endeavors involve efforts both big and small. The larger projects include working as pro bono counsel to about 250 Holocaust survivors and their relatives, who want to sue a French government railroad that transported more than 75,000 people to Nazi concentration camps.

The lawsuit is banned by the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act, but Akin Gump has been lobbying Congress to pass the Holocaust Rail Justice Act, which would remove immunity from railroads that transported victims to Nazi camps.

The firm's pro bono efforts also include capital cases, poverty law, family law and consumer rights litigation.

Moving forward, Schulman said Akin Gump will look to maximize the value of its pro bono efforts by focusing firmwide on specific projects in the name of efficiency. In the meantime, Reed said, she has never once been turned down for a pro bono opportunity that she's brought to the firm.

"I like being able to do the high-impact pro bono cases and also the poverty law of someone who got a notice of eviction wrongfully," Reed said. "That's the great part about being a lawyer."

--Editing by John Quinn.

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