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# Steven Schulman: The Greatest Job in the World

By Steven Schulman, on Thu Apr 21, 2011 at 8:30 AM ET



I have the greatest job in the world — or so I am told nearly every week or so, typically by a law student, but sometimes by colleagues and adversaries. No, I am not the shortstop for the Boston Red Sox (**Jed Lowrie** is doing just fine, thank you very much).

I am a partner at **Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld**, an international law firm with more than 800 attorneys around the world. And not just *\*any\** partner, but the Pro Bono Partner, leading a firm-wide practice group in which more than 550 of my colleagues work every year, collectively devoting nearly 60,000 hours annually to a wide variety of indigent clients and public interest causes. I work very hard, but I rarely bill an hour.

How did I get this gig? Well, like many such stories, this one starts with a large Nigerian coming to my office one spring afternoon.

On that day more than 13 years ago, I was a litigation associate at an even larger international law firm, **Latham & Watkins**. My practice consisted primarily of advising large corporations facing all manner of antitrust issues, from mergers and acquisitions being challenged by the Department of Justice to competitors suing over allegedly wrongful conduct. To put it bluntly, my practice was as relevant to a Nigerian man as the Washington Nationals are to the National League pennant race.

But there he was, because I had raised my hand at a litigation group lunch when someone asked for help in this Nigerian's immigration court case. Once we settled into a conference room, Tolu introduced himself and then his quite large family — both physically and numerically. My charge: get them asylum. Second place: deportation back to Nigeria, likely to return to the prison where he had been detained and tortured for his pro-democracy activism. I had never set foot in an immigration court, not could I confidently place Nigeria on a map. But I did have enough legal training to figure it all out, and enough pressure, given the stakes, to motivate me to work as hard as I would for any paying client.



Placing Nigeria on the map...

Obviously, we won, or else I would still be worrying about how to get approval for the merger of the largest and second-largest widget makers in the North American market.

Winning Tolu's case set me on an unusual path, one that eventually led me to focus on pro bono practice half-time (at Latham) and then full-time (when I joined Akin Gump in 2006).

It consequently led Jonathan to place on me the moniker of "recovering antitrust lawyer." I resisted this label at first — after all, I did not surrender my law firm credentials or lifestyle, and count among my partners some fine antitrust lawyers. I am still very much part of the law firm world. Then again, the recovering politicians who contribute to this site are in similar positions — at once quite engaged in politics, even if no longer serving in office.

Like these RPs, I don't reject my former practice. Rather, I embrace the law firm model and ethos, but work to improve our firm by pushing it to meet the lofty ideals of our profession. Representing Tolu, and subsequently other refugees from all over the world, inspired me not just to do this work myself, but to enlist others to use their talents to serve the less fortunate among us. I continue to be inspired by my colleagues, who selflessly give their time to advise the **KIPP charter schools** or fight for Social Security benefits for disabled clients.



Tolu and family

My fellow Akin Gump attorneys show every day that the billable hour isn't the only law firm value, as much as the profession has been driven to act more like a bottom-line business.

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