

Pro Bono Firm Of 2011: Akin Gump

By **Samuel Howard**

Law360, New York (July 11, 2011) -- Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP gives pro bono clients the same unstinting service as its powerhouse patrons, recently leading its attorneys to defend free speech and torture victims' rights at the nation's highest court, making it one of Law360's Pro Bono Firms of 2011.

Akin Gump has built a pro bono practice that is every bit as polished and active as its other practices, with roughly 600 attorneys pledging close to 63,000 hours from May 2010 to May 2011, for an average of 80 hours per lawyer. No mean feat given the general uptick in the legal sector.

Steven Schulman joined Akin Gump in 2006 as head of its global pro bono practice and has transformed it from a Washington-based litigation outfit to an overarching practice that draws on the firm's spectrum of expertise, tapping into attorneys' passion for the law and ensuring that their efforts are productive.

"Akin set out years ago to make the pro bono practice equal to its others," Schulman said. "Rather than have an adjunct pro bono program, we've built a practice that is well-integrated and as well respected as any practice in the firm. It is something we can all take pride in."

While the firm historically focused its pro bono efforts on litigation, Schulman has been instrumental in opening the practice to include transactional work, international development, human rights advocacy and employment counseling for clients that would not otherwise be able to afford it.

In certain respects, the pro bono practice is Akin Gump's biggest, incorporating all the offices and creating a point of contact for the 900 or so attorneys at the firm.

The firm logged tens of thousands of hours in pro bono work over the past year, working to fight housing discrimination in Los Angeles, serving as public defenders in the Bronx, N.Y., and leading complex transactions for the government of Liberia and KIPP Charter Schools, among other endeavors.

Largely content with toiling in the trenches, the pro bono practice also accomplished more visible feats in the past year, twice appearing before the U.S. Supreme Court.

In a prominent First Amendment case, Akin Gump lawyers narrowed the scope of a 1999 law that criminalized depictions of animal cruelty and also paved the way for a group of Somali-born citizens to bring torture claims against the country's former prime minister.

Forgoing both sticks and carrots, Akin does not require its attorneys to perform pro bono work. Rather, the firm removes barriers to participation, treating pro bono hours no different than billable time and expecting lawyers to approach their tasks with as much rigor as they would any other assignment.

"Pro bono service is hardwired into the culture at Akin and valued just as highly as all its other work," Schulman said. "It is one of the things that really unites the firm. No matter what practice or level, you can be part of the pro bono practice and contribute in meaningful ways."

If lawyers are wary of pro bono service, it is often not because they are uncharitable or apathetic, but merely reluctant to stray into unfamiliar territory and risk producing anything but the highest caliber work, Schulman says.

The noble paradox — the tendency to be kept from good works by the commitment to excellent work — is less problematic if attorneys have pro bono opportunities that are in their wheelhouse and match their expertise and background, according to Schulman.

For those lawyers that do go out on a limb and take a public interest or asylum case for the first time, Schulman ensures that they have all the in-house expertise, resources and guidance they need to perform at their highest level.

Patricia Millett, head of Akin Gump's Supreme Court practice and co-head of the appellate practice, said that the pro bono accomplishments reflected the firm's larger approach to doing business and the lawyers' shared passion for the law.

"At Akin Gump, we fight vigorously for every client and are committed to practicing law at the highest level, without exception. Whether a case is pro bono or not has nothing to do with it," Millett said. "We always do our best and expect a stellar performance, which is the way it should be."

Millett led the defense of documentary filmmaker Robert Stevens before the high court, which firmly upheld an appeals court judgment vacating Stevens' conviction for selling videos of dogfights, and helmed Somali torture victims' case against Gen. Mohamed Ali Samantar's foreign immunity defense.

Akin Gump undertook these complex and closely-watched cases not only because they shaped the legal landscape but also because the appellate bar has become so specialized. Without the likes of Akin Gump, clients unable to afford elite representation enter a grossly lopsided fight, to the detriment of the entire legal system.

"It's helpful for the courts and healthy for the judicial process when everyone has the best representation possible," Millett said. "We really care about the law and the legal process. That's why we're here."

Akin Gump proves that Big Law can be both idealistic and prodigiously successful. If anything, the firm's business success and tireless pro bono service signify the same ambition: to practice law at the highest level.

As the Supreme Court cases show, the firm's pro bono activities have enabled the firm to effect sweeping change but its commitment to the practice also has more quotidian benefits.

Success begets success, and pro bono cases are an excellent way for junior attorneys to assert themselves and generate momentum in their practice especially when they are not only permitted but expected to fully devote themselves to the pro bono client, according to Tatman Savio, counsel in Akin Gump's international trade practice.

"Akin prioritizes pro bono work, understanding that it not only makes a positive contribution to society but also gives associates the kind of meaningful experience that makes them better lawyers," Savio said. "They have the chance to work closely with pro bono clients, manage their own cases and excel while tackling unfamiliar issues."

Savio worked alongside senior international trade attorney Margaret Marsh and an associate to win asylum for a woman and her children from Somalia and Chad, frustrating an attempt by the woman's brother-in-law, a member of the ruling family in Chad, to gain custody of the children.

In addition to grooming emerging practitioners, the pro bono practice promotes the mentorship that makes Akin Gump a community as well as a workplace, allowing more experienced attorneys to give the sort of guidance they benefited from earlier in their career, Marsh says.

Under Schulman's energetic leadership, Akin Gump's pro bono practice has proven a resounding success, providing critical services to the underfunded while fortifying the firm's core values and fostering top-notch attorneys.

--Editing by Andrew Park.