

# Nurturing Leadership and Pro Bono Engagement Through Nonprofit Board Service

By DAN A. BRODY



I write this reflection following the Pro Bono Fair put on annually by the Young Lawyers Section (YLS) of the Connecticut Bar Association (CBA). The section includes all members of the CBA who are 37 years old or younger or who have been admitted to the Bar for less than six full bar years. The YLS community is a particularly good audience for a discussion about the value of pro bono work as early-career lawyers can benefit from handling pro bono matters perhaps even as much as their pro bono clients. That concept is not news to anyone. It is well-known that pro bono work provides all lawyers, especially those with more potential to develop, with the opportunity to practice and learn legal skills. Think of any critical legal skill. One can develop that doing pro bono work. However, I hope this piece finds more experienced members of the bar. As well as the concept, the final note, applies to all.

Not only does pro bono work enhance legal skills, it also makes one a more well-rounded person. Pro bono work extends not only to the provision of legal advice or representation, but also to service of pro bono and legal aid organizations. The American Bar Association model rules recognize that time spent “serving on boards of pro bono or legal services programs” qualifies as pro bono work. See ABA Model Rule 6.1, cmt. 8. The YLS Pro Bono Fair exhibited a number of le-

gal aid organizations who would qualify under that ABA model rules. Service on the board of directors of one of these organizations can aid in the development of an attorney in a number of ways that are not strictly speaking legal skills. A non-exhaustive list would include finance, governance, leadership, and networking.

Most legal aid organizations are organized as nonprofit organizations that receive their funding from a variety of sources including donations, foundations, and grants. Service on the board of directors of a legal aid organization exposes one to the financial world of a nonprofit from the inside and necessitates under-

attorneys, many are. And while diversity of professional roles strengthens a board, attorneys are well placed to assist with issues relating to the governance of the organization’s board. A governance role would require a director to become familiar with the organization’s bylaws, policies, and external contracts. It may require oversight of contract negotiations around strategic partnerships with other organizations. Further, it would require a deep understanding of the organization in order to assess continually the suitability of the governance structure to the current organization and its intended director of travel. Service on a nonprofit legal aid organization board comes with a number of duties, such as

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standing of the organization’s finances and structure in order to contribute meaningfully to financial and other decisions. It also provides a platform to learn about fundraising, 990s, budgeting, auditing, and strategic development.

While members of a legal aid organization’s board of directors do not need to be

the duties of care, loyalty, and obedience. A board member would need to learn how to stay informed and when it is appropriate to exercise well-placed reliance on the expertise of another board member, of in the financial areas. Sitting in a board room or in a virtual meeting comes with it responsibility to exercise post-Enron good governance practices. I believe that experience



helps create more well-rounded lawyers and people.

Service on a nonprofit board provides an opportunity to grow leadership skills outside of the normal workplace. It provides attorneys more junior in title the chance to step forward in a different setting and lead in discussions and projects in a way that is authentic. These opportunities lead to growth that then translates back to the workplace. These can be opportunities for growth or professional fulfillment that cannot be manufactured at work. Boards are decision-making bodies. Finding one's voice to participate in those discussions and practice in consensus building can aid one's development.

Some lawyers struggle to leave the office or home, in the case of a hybrid work environment. Taking the example of the many YLS members at the Pro Bono Fair, pro bono work and connection to legal aid organizations can also help with an important but non-legal skill: networking. Attorneys meet new connections and develop lasting ones through nonprofit board service. Those connections can, and certainly have in many cases, led to attorney-client relationships, referral sources, mentor and mentee relationships, job references, and friends. Given the nature of the mission and work that legal aid organizations engage in, it is a safe bet that one volunteering to work on a legal aid nonprofit board will meet oth-

er community oriented and likeminded colleagues.

Finally, a byproduct of board service likely will be an increased knowledge of the organization's mission and work that often goes hand-in-hand with a desire to do more pro bono work. ▢



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