

Pro Bono—A Fair Exchange



Lawrence P. Nolan



October has been designated as Pro Bono Month by the State Bar of Michigan for the eighth straight year.

Review your client list and determine who needs your help the most but can least afford to pay for your services. In the spirit of giving back, bring peace to the life of a client or family who will never forget what a good, honest lawyer has done to help solve their most serious problem.

The court system we have in America exists to provide meaning and structure to our lives. It is the difference between complete chaos and a civilized society. As lawyers, we are nothing if not, at a minimum, trusted officers of the court. Together, we make the system work, and we should always strive to make it work better.

Pro bono is not just the right thing to do; it is the thing that makes being a lawyer so great. We can make such a difference to a person whose life is in conflict: a tenant being evicted unjustly, a mother fighting for the custody of her child, an accident victim trying to understand his rights and figure out Michigan's no-fault statute, or a client walking through the complicated maze of an estate plan.

The views expressed in the President's Page, as well as other expressions of opinions published in the *Bar Journal* from time to time, do not necessarily state or reflect the official position of the State Bar of Michigan, nor does their publication constitute an endorsement of the views expressed. They are the opinions of the authors and are intended not to end discussion, but to stimulate thought about significant issues affecting the legal profession, the making of laws, and the adjudication of disputes.

There is no higher calling, no greater gift, and no greater honor than doing pro bono work.

Our profession deals with every issue imaginable. We see the best and worst of things. We have been referred to as peace-makers, problem solvers, and litigators. All around us, we know there are people in dire need of a lawyer who simply cannot afford our services: a mother and child abused by an alcoholic stepfather, a young husband and wife without insurance whose home was destroyed by arson, an innocent child shot in a drive-by drug deal gone bad whose mother can't get medical care because of mounting bills—the areas of need go on and on.

I fully understand that as lawyers, we must make a living and be able to keep the doors open and the lights on. We do no one any good if we become solely dedicated to representing clients who can't pay us. We would go out of business within a short time. When I talk about pro bono, I'm suggesting doing something every week, month, or year. It is nothing more than performing a random act of professional service without expecting compensation.

The State Bar has grown to more than 45,000 members. The key to pro bono service is not a few doing all the work, but

many doing some of the work. The work that needs to be done is great. The burden can be lightened when everyone does his or her small part.

Recognize a needy client, identify the issue, and pledge to attempt to resolve it on his or her behalf. We don't have to look far to find clients for whom the need is obvious. The act of giving is an acknowledgment that you're thinking about an individual and you have a desire to use your abilities as a lawyer to help that individual without any expectation of compensation. Helping a client will give you a feeling of having done something good for someone in need. You can't buy that feeling; you won't find it at Walmart, Sam's Club, or Amazon.com. The goodwill your client will be left with will serve you well for years to come, and you will have a client for life.

So go out and commit a random act of pro bono service. There has never been a greater need, and there has probably never been a time when it will be more greatly appreciated. Calendar in some pro bono cases to handle this month and do something that makes you feel good about being a lawyer.

The work you do and the feeling you get in return may just be a fair exchange. ■

Pro bono is not just the right thing to do; it is the thing that makes being a lawyer so great. We can make such a difference to a person whose life is in conflict....