



Laura Grover

Helping Clients in Legal Limbo

Laura Grover's philosophy of life shapes her practice of the law, which is devoted mainly to family law, children's protective proceedings, and juvenile law. Her approach—which involves a huge time commitment and the capacity to walk away from more money—is not something that most lawyers are in a position to emulate, but that's how she's been running her solo practice in rural Marquette County since she began practicing in November 1991.

Typically, about 60 to 70 percent of her practice involves reduced fees or free service. With the exception of those who are at, or near the poverty level, Grover says all the rest of her clientele make more money than she does. Still, she is able to make her overhead and put food on the table. It helps that she is married, her husband works, they have no children, and have no extravagant habits.

"I have a very strong personal commitment about who we are in this life," Grover said. "I am doing this stuff because I can. . . . For me to not do this work would be for me to turn my back on people who need help and I can't do that. That's a personal thing. That's what I call good hard work. I do this work from the heart. It's the only reason I'm practicing anymore."

Finding Time for Pro Bono

Attorney Roger Bauer has deep roots and strong ties in Alpena, where he grew up. "I'm fourth generation on both sides of my parents, so I know lots of people around here," he said. The combination of small town friendliness and an overburdened public defender's office, means that from time to time, he is asked to step in and represent low income clients simply because there's no one left to do it. That's not to say that Bauer is not hard pressed for time. He has an extremely busy practice and is the owner and partner of the firm Gillard, Bauer, Mazrum, Florip, Smigelski and Gulden—the largest law practice in the area.

Bauer, has been practicing law for over three decades and specializes in criminal law, family law, wills, estates and probate, personal injury, social security disability as well as real estate transactions. He's often helped non-paying clients in these areas of the legal system.

"We have a shelter here for abused women. The Legal Aid people will not represent them if they are not being presently abused by

Doing

Her disenchantment with the humanity of lawyers has contributed to her overall outlook. "There's an arrogance to lawyers that we gain literally in our second year of law school. We finish refining it in our third year. We go out in the world and we think we're important. It's not as bad as doctors are, but it's of the same ilk. So I can be the alternative; I guess that's how I see myself." Grover says it's been a learning process for her and she is more understanding these days about the constraints that other lawyers face. Many simply do not have the options that she does.

In Marquette, she works closely with the probate court, and at times, the circuit court, providing legal services at \$40 an hour—a fee that has remained unchanged for the past 20 years and that is less than 50 percent of her standard fee.

In her own private practice, she employs various flexible methods and accounting techniques that help make legal services accessible to the poor. "I've been known to take \$100 retainers. I've been known to take \$1 retainers. I have had a case where I took a penny retainer."

Grover says her goal is never to have money problems with clients. All her clients, pro bono and paying, always receive a monthly balance. They could be paying her \$10 a month, but this amount is determined by their ability to pay. She says she does not now often do work for no charge at all because, in her experience she has found that there is an issue of pride involved.

"People would rather pay me \$5 a month than not pay me. . . . Charging people money allows them to feel that they are getting the

their husbands. It's an emergency situation and I've had an arrangement over there with the shelter, where on occasion, I've helped their people out when they didn't have any money. I can think of a specific example where a lady had four kids, had social security disability—a relatively young lady in her middle 30s, whose husband deserted her and moved south to Florida. She needed to get a divorce so that she could get a support order entered so that we could chase him down there. I've gone to court, handled her divorce work for nothing."

Bauer says his firm sometimes takes cases that represent a big financial loss.

"We've taken cases in our office from the Michigan Supreme Court, where we've won but we lost so much money doing it, it's incredible because that client can't pay. But we feel the case is important enough to take there."

Doing pro bono work does not just mean representing clients without charge in court. According to the State Bar of Michigan guidelines, pro bono also includes financial contributions or providing a minimum of thirty hours of professional representation or services to organizations. Using these criteria, Bauer easily puts in the minimum voluntary requirement of 30 hours a year. But finding more time for pro bono work can be a problem. "We have

Good Up North

By Naseem Stecker

respect that they deserve from an attorney. So by offering reduced rates, by offering payment plans they can afford, by shaving billing hours and sometimes doing the no-charge and trying to keep the bill in a reasonable realm, I'm also allowing people to save face because they are not able to actually afford what other attorneys would charge.... The better I've gotten at knowing which of these options to employ with the person, the fewer cases I've had to write off. I would say certainly less than one percent of gross revenue. Certainly probably less than one percent of cases all told for me."

Grover had some interesting observations to make about offering free legal services based on her experiences. "Some clients will be more demanding of your time and energy. They will expect more than somebody who is paying for services—both in terms of result and in terms of amount of contact, input, and utilization of my time."

She says that people who are not paying for services sometimes have a sensibility like court-appointed clients: "Well, you're only a court-appointed attorney. You're just doing the minimum." This is also another reason why she thinks it's important for lawyers to get involved in serving the poor, whether it's to offer legal services for free or at a reduced rate.

"I think that the Bar's requirement for pro bono is minimal— I'm not saying there aren't very good legal services being provided in pro bono, but on the other hand... there is a segment of the population that has a lot more limitations, and that's the segment of the population that doesn't qualify for free legal services. In order to

maintain their own lives, they can't really afford what most lawyers charge. We're talking the working poor. A lot of people fit that category and I have to believe that that's not only true up here but throughout the state." By filling in the gap, Grover is in effect helping clients in legal limbo.

Other projects that reflect her special view of how to practice law include being an emergency resource attorney for the Harbor House, a safe haven for abused women and their children. Grover has trained volunteers for the shelter since 1992.

She's actively involved in her community, sitting on various boards like the Alger-Marquette Community Action Board and the Independence Non-Profit Housing Corporation. She often addresses various groups about issues in the law and participates as a mock trial judge for the university and high school. For about six months of the year, she has an intern from Northern Michigan University or the local high school helping her and learning whatever they can about being a lawyer.

Overall, Laura Grover is very happy to be up north. "Marquette is a wonderful place to practice law because the system really works up here. We have a lot of cases but we don't have the incredible congestion of the dockets that the major metropolitan areas tend to have." She is also very thankful to other lawyers in the area for their support and help in making justice accessible. At the same time, she's also wondering about the future. "My retirement theme is, I've got to find a replacement up here one of these days—somebody who does stuff the way I do." ♦

Legal Aid and a Public Defender's office. But if people come to me, I'll help them. I don't go out to solicit pro bono work. I do have to make a living and I try to pay my overhead."

Besides volunteering his time for pro bono, Bauer also does public service work for the Alpena community. He has been chairman of the board of trustees of Alpena Community College, an elected position, for 21 years. He is also a member of the Alpena Community College Foundation Board, an organization that gives scholarships to pre-law, criminal justice, and legal assistant students. Bauer sits on the Judge Philip Glennie Scholarship Committee that gives a \$1,000 scholarship to a needy law student each year. For a period of ten years, he was a mentor to high school students in the model judiciary program that is part of the Youth in Government program. He trained high school students to try mock trials for a week in Lansing each year. "I am proud to say that two of my former students are now attorneys and two are in law school... I receive a lot of satisfaction from these positions but no monetary pay."



Roger Bauer

The State Bar Representative Assembly's Voluntary Standard for Pro Bono Participation

"All active members of the State Bar of Michigan should participate in the direct delivery of pro bono legal services to the poor by annually:

1. Providing representation, without charge, to a minimum of three low-income individuals; or
2. Providing a minimum of thirty hours of representation or services, without charge, to low-income individuals or organizations; or
3. Providing a minimum of thirty hours of professional services at no fee or a reduced fee to persons of limited means, or to public service or charitable groups or organizations; or
4. Contributing a minimum of \$300 to not-for-profit programs organized for the purpose of delivering civil legal services to low-income individuals or organizations."

Clearly, the rewards far surpass any sacrifices involved. "One great thing about practicing law, and that's why I've always loved doing it, is that you can help your clients, and in the case of the lady whose husband is down south, I could get her the divorce that she so richly deserved. I got her the support, which she also richly deserved. She's forever grateful and I feel good. That's the intangible (reward). I think that you're there and the law is there and you don't ever want to leave somebody out there that feels something unjust has just happened to them because they didn't have any money. I think everybody deserves to be represented." ♦

Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal.