

Professor Nelson Miller

Attorneys are very busy individuals. Very few limit their employment to 40 hours a week. But the next time an attorney tells you he or she is too busy to take a pro bono case, help with a fundraiser, coach soccer, or serve as deacon, you might tell them about Nelson Miller.

Nelson Miller is a recently appointed full-time associate professor at Thomas M. Cooley Law School, Grand Rapids campus. An announcement in the Grand Rapids Press reported that Professor Miller will spend time outside the classroom providing services to residents of the Heartside neighborhood and that during his 17 years in private practice, he provided pro bono services to hundreds of clients at different clinics. Therein may lie an understatement.

Beginning in 1999, while maintaining full-time private practice in civil litigation, Miller offered pro bono legal services (typically an afternoon each week) in community centers in low-income, minority communities in Muskegon, Benton Harbor, and Grand Rapids. The work tended to be six half-hour consultations each afternoon, possibly with a follow-up letter or telephone call. Occasionally, the work required drafting or court appearances. The subject matters included insurance and benefits, employment, family law, probate, landlord/tenant, consumer, and just about everything else considered to be "poverty law." Much of the work involved referring individuals to contingent fee attorneys (worker's compensation and Social Security, for instance), other legal service organizations (especially for bankruptcy and landlord/tenant matters), or public assistance. Over the years, he served approximately 1,000 individuals. He not only met with clients but kept records to help the non-profit centers seek funding and evaluate the needs of their con-



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stituents. At Cooley since April 2004, Miller has moved his pro bono service to DeGage Ministries in the Heartside district of Grand Rapids, where the new Cooley Law School is located.

As is often the case, the minority church-based community centers in which Miller worked and their related non-profit organizations also became frequent pro bono clients. With the help of two legal assistants when he was in private practice, he was able to incorporate, obtain tax-exempt status, and otherwise assist 48 non-profit organizations. The organizations included 17 churches, 22 social service agencies, six church-related organizations, and three public schools. Miller reports that "their ministries and missions were wonderful and diverse, including such programs

as hunting trips for inner-city youth for recreation and mentoring, low-income housing, children's television production, three public charter schools serving low-income communities, a designated driver service, food pantries, several minority churches, a jail ministry, and several community development organizations." Out of this service Miller developed both a manual, "100 Step Guide," for advising non-profits and a "100 Point Rating System," to help one non-profit umbrella organization form, evaluate, and assist other non-profits.

Bishop Nathaniel Wells, Jr. of the Holy Trinity Institutional Church of God in Christ has worked closely with Miller on church activities. The Bishop reports that, "Nelson Miller is the most giving, competent professional that I have met in my 43 years of pastoral ministry. He is dedicated to the improvement of humanity!"

For anyone else, full-time practice or full-time professorship and the pro bono activities would be a full plate of service activities. But Miller is also active in the State Bar as a member of the Representative Assembly and the Equal Access Initiative Committee, served on the Law-Related Education Committee, and acted as a judge for high school mock trial tournaments sponsored by the Center for Civic Education. He is a director and treasurer of Tri-Valley Academy (public school) in Muskegon, and a director and secretary of Wells-Reenstra Non-Profit Housing Corporation. He serves on the boards of similar non-profit housing organizations.

Somehow, Miller has found time to author nine law review/law journal articles, five

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chapters in legal treatises, two *Michigan Bar Journal* articles, a Supreme Court amicus brief with Professor William Wagner of Cooley, two book reviews, and a public presentation on *Federal Courts Enforcing International Norms*. He has completed six additional articles for publication. He managed some spare time to become certified at the General Civil Mediation, SCAO-approved 40-hour training program, and attend the National Litigation Academy XX—International Law Symposium in California. He has been a case evaluator for courts in Berrien and Muskegon counties and is a case evaluator and mediator in Ottawa County.

Miller began his writing career early at the University of Michigan Law School, where he sat on Law Review. He further distinguished himself there as a member of the Order of the Coif and recipient of the Evidence Award. He graduated in 1987 cum laude. He completed his undergraduate work at Indiana University, receiving a B.A. in Political Science, with highest honors (4.0/4.0 GPA).

Prior to his appointment as an associate professor at Cooley, Miller was an associate at Davis and Fajen, P.C. in Ann Arbor, Michigan from 1987 to 1990, concentrating on civil litigation in constitutional law, civil rights, commercial, malpractice, insurance, employment, and personal injury. From 1990 to 2004, he was a partner at Fajen and Miller, Grand Haven, Michigan (formerly Davis, Fajen and Miller from 1990 to 1997), concentrating on civil litigation in constitutional law, civil rights, commercial, malpractice, insurance, employment, personal injury, and advising non-profit organizations. He was a visiting professor at Cooley in Lansing for the 2004 spring term.

His volunteer activities have not diminished his legal ability in the least. Honorable Calvin L. Bosman, Circuit Judge, 20th Circuit Court, Ottawa opines: "Despite his busy law practice and the myriad other organizations to which he gave his time and expertise, Mr. Miller was always a pleasure to have represent a client in court. He was always well prepared, skillfully represented his clients, and was always the consummate gentleman, having the ability to disagree without being disagreeable."

Miller is delightfully much too modest about his activities, saying "It really does not take much time if you do a little each week." Others do not hesitate to extol his virtues, personal and professional. Don DeLuc, Dean of the Thomas A. Cooley Law School says: "Nelson Miller is precisely the type of professor we like to have at Cooley, respected by colleagues and the community. He is an excellent complement to our goal of having an academically accomplished teaching staff, committed to the improvement of our students, the profession, and our communities. More importantly, he is a person of the high moral character that we hope to foster in each Cooley graduate."

Honorable Gregory Pittman of the Muskegon County Probate Court reports: "Nelson is a wonderful example of what those in our profession should aspire to be. He is an honorable and conscientious man, who provides good counsel to those he serves. He brings dignity and goodwill to all with whom he is associated. Nelson embodies that which is good and decent about the practice of law, while striving to improve the quality of life for our entire community."

Miller's humility is evident in his description of his inspiration for pro bono work. "Credit goes to an elderly woman who shared

spontaneously in the middle of a service a quotation from Isaiah 59: 'The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace . . . The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene.' 'Break up your unplowed ground,' the elderly woman added to no one in particular, though the words certainly pierced me—I was the only lawyer around." Miller started on his path of pro bono work. Later in the same setting, the youth choir sang a very old hymn to no one in particular. Again it reached and confirmed Miller: "You are my lawyer, thank you Jesus." In Miller's particular experience, it is "the life and spirit of Christ through which all such good works are done."

In Miller's particular experience, that life and spirit are alive and very well indeed. ◆

Francine Cullari practices real estate, estate planning, and business law in Grand Blanc. She is Vice-Chairperson of the State Bar of Michigan Publications and Website Advisory Committee, where she is responsible for the Michigan Bar Journal. She is the editor of Bar Beat, a local magazine for the legal profession.