

Gain the Most by Charging the Least

The Benefits of Committing to Pro Bono Service

By Nathaniel Bruno

Practicing law will earn you a living, but pro bono service will give you a reason to live.” That advice from my supervising partner, Robert S. Gerber, is some of the wisest and truest I’ve received as a young lawyer. The long hours, adversarial context, and tedious nature of a young associate’s work are a taxing grind. But pro bono work is a glimmer of sunlight through the storm—a motivational ray of hope that reminds us how much our work can matter, and that it’s a blessing to make a positive, measurable difference in someone’s life.

For all of the jokes describing lawyers as sharks, shysters, bloodsuckers (insert your favorite pejorative term here), the legal profession remains one of the best careers for helping people in traumatic situations. The “Esquire” behind our names is a powerful badge of respect and competence, no matter how “inexperienced” we may be. We can use it for the advantage of others less fortunate. Imagine the holistic difference our pro bono efforts would have on the general perception of our profession, while simultaneously improving our own lawyer skills.

The ABA definition of “pro bono” includes any “participation in activities for improving the law, the legal system or the legal profession.” So, be it through individual cases or involvement with professional or public associations, pro bono service yields phenomenal professional returns not otherwise

available, including:

- opportunities to explore interesting legal subject matter or contemporary issues completely different from the routine of your everyday legal discipline;
- primary responsibility for managing a case or project and developing strategy;
- chances to attempt new skills that partners may be reluctant to allow you to try for the first time for a significant paying client (taking a deposition or arguing a substantive motion);
- direct interaction with clients and other lawyers and learning to gauge their preferences, goals, and communicational styles;
- occasions to hone speaking and presentation skills in court, community seminars, or other advocacy opportunities;
- learning the diverse perspectives, struggles, and issues endemic to your local community; and
- building confidence and good judgment.

But well beyond professional benefits are the profound personal and emotional rewards from helping a person or organization in need. Tearful thank yous, hugs of appreciation, letters of gratitude, new friendships. These are the inspirational honors of pro bono work, far removed from the billing disputes that can follow even successful efforts for paying clients.

While still young, it’s important to keep a sense of long-term

perspective. Ask yourself whether what you are doing today will matter to you ten years from now. Then, try to always be involved in at least one thing that will matter. The matters I’ve been most excited to share with my family and friends, and the ones I believe have provided me the most personal fulfillment and character development, have been pro bono.

Recommit to investing your time in pro bono service and make a habit of it early in your career. Take the case of an indigent or elderly client. Help a family adopt a child. Judge a competition. Join a committee. Read to a kindergarten class. Through whatever pro bono activity is most meaningful to you, use your access as a lawyer to benefit others. Even with the stresses of billable hours, student loan debt, and working toward a future partnership, don’t just exist to earn a living. Give yourself a reason to live. You might make living a little better for someone else along the way. **VL**

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FOR MORE INFO

Visit www.abanet.org/legal-services/probono/home.html, the site of the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service. You’ll find numerous ideas for public service, valuable information on pro bono programs and best practices, as well as the Pro Bono and Public Service Best Practices Resource Guide.