A Successful Litigator Makes Time For Pro Bono

The Editor interviews Elizabeth S. Stong, Partner, Wilkie Farr & Gallacher

Editor: Please describe your responsibilities at Wilkie Farr.

Stong: I am a partner in the litigation department. I represent clients in federal and state civil cases and regulatory matters, including matters before the SEC, the U.S. Labor Department, and other administrative bodies. My practice emphasizes securities cases, complex commercial cases, and employment cases.

Editor: When did you develop an interest in pro bono?

Stong: My interest in pro bono goes back to the first case I worked on after law school. We represented the City and State of New York against the Census Bureau in an effort to correct the undercount of New York City's population in the 1980 decennial census. That case went to trial in 1983, and was an example of a pro bono case that addressed a large policy issue.

Another type of pro bono in which I have been involved is helping individuals with personal legal problems. As a summer associate, I helped to represent a woman who had been locked out of her apartment. She complained to her landlord that some repairs were done inadequately after a fire. Serious damage was covered over cosmetically, creating a dangerous situation.

As a very junior associate, I represented the plaintiff in a wrongful termination discrimination case and got my first substantive deposition experience. A few years later, I argued a Second Circuit appeal in a civil rights case brought by a state prisoner and obtained a reversal of the dismissal of his Section 1983 case. More recently, I helped enact a drug dealer from a building in the Bronx.

A third type of pro bono in which I have been involved involves educating people about their legal rights. Working with the New York City Bar Association, we prepare a tenant's guide to housing courts and a housing court video. One hundred thousand copies of that guide were distributed among the five boroughs of New York City. We focused on providing information for tenants so they can represent themselves as effectively as possible. Updated editions of the guide are still in use. More recently, I have served on the board of City Bar Fund Inc.

Editor: How has MFY tried to expand its contacts with lawyers in private practice?

Stong: Last fall, we targeted an event for younger lawyers— including corporate, tax, and transactional lawyers as well as litigators—to introduce them to MFY. Mike Carroll, a Wilkie associate and former MFY intern, recruited a terrific group to organize the event at a local club. Hundreds of lawyers and non-lawyers attended. We tapped into a wonderful source of energy and enthusiasm for the kinds of things that MFY is doing. We hope to capitalize on that energy with new projects to keep people involved.

Editor: Could the enthusiasm and interest of that group be harnessed to expand service to the poor?

Stong: We certainly hope so. One of our plans for the new year is to organize a new group called Team MFY. Team MFY will undertake three or four projects during the year. Members will be encouraged to participate in as many of these projects as they can, depending upon interest and availability. Flexibilit
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"...it will be the key."

We are thinking about doing several things. Of course, there will be a second annual party in the fall, like last fall's event. We also want to do more things free of charge. Some of us are planning a hands-on community service projects to provide

The Team MYF project will be to encourage lawyers to volunteer as guardians ad litem by offering training to staff. MYF staff attorneys need volunteers and non-lawyers who can serve as appointments of the court as guardians ad litem for clients who suffer from disabilities that prevent them from making decisions. One example is the decision to apply for benefits, which could permit individuals to make rent payments and avoid eviction. Fundamental life issues can be at stake.

The training and time commitment involved in serving as a guardian ad litem is very manageable. In this role, Team MYF members will perform a real service to MYF's clients and have a very satisfying professional experience.

Another project we are considering is working with MYF staff lawyers to train Team MYF members to help people, principally women, in divorce proceedings. This is an area where many people cannot afford a lawyer. We need to plan an annual event. And we hope to run a semi-annual charity and toy drive for MYF's clients.

Editor: How can lawyers fit this into their schedules when there are so many demands on their time these days?

Stong: We want to create opportunities for pro bono work. By maximizing the impact of these projects, people interested in pro bono will be able to fit a project into their schedule.

Editor: How does Willkie encourage pro bono?

Stong: Willkie encourages pro bono in many ways. Willkie lawyers undertake a large range of public service activities, not only as junior and mid-level associates, but also as senior associates, young partners and senior partners. We begin as early as the summer program where we encourage our summer associates to participate in pro bono cases in the office and to work with pro bono organizations outside of the office, including the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights and Brooklyn Legal Services, among others.

Many Willkie partners have significant roles in pro bono organizations. For example, Luis Ochoa founded and served as chair of Volunteers for Legal Services. Larry Kamien serves on the board of Legal Services of New York, Inc., and Joe Bao and Leslie Mazzu have served on the board of Network for Women's Services, which was founded by former Willkie partner Cathy Douglas. Jeanette Lubega is on the board of Sanctuary for Families. Benito Romano serves on the board of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund and Governor Cuomo is Co-Chair of Partnership for a Drug-Free America.

Several partners are active in education-related public service activities. Jack Nussbaum is Visiting Professor of the Board of Preparatory School. Dave McCabe helped create a children's library and served as its president for five years. Dick Santam, Tony Schlesinger, Bill Grant, Gene Pinover, Dave Foster, and Yvonne Gross serve on boards of educational institutions. Tom is also on the board of St. Ann's Center for Restoration and the Arts. Tommy Hu is on the board of Practicing Attorneys for Law Students Program, Inc. ("PALS"), which provides attorney mentors for minority law students.

Several partners are also involved with other organizations. Peter Schmidt chairs the board of City Harvest, which supports several boards in the City. Rick Reinholtz is on the board of The Adirondack Council, and he has represented the Council in the constitutional litigation relating to the Adirondack Park. Ray Mersini is a director of the U.S. Fund for UNICEF, as well as the St. John Partnership, which assists the homeless, and the Whitney and Nelson Foundations. Tom Cerabino is on the board of the Neighborhood House of New York. Steve Garner is a director of The International Center, which works with immigrants. Bill Gump is on the board of United Way in New Jersey. Peter Lakes is on the board of the Self Help Community Services, Inc., which works with the elderly, including aging Holocaust survivors. Dwight Ellis is on the board of the Brooklyn Housing Trust Fund, a new housing organization.

Editor: Do you think that pro bono enhances judicial and community perceptions of the firm?

Stong: Of course! Everything a firm does contributes to its professional reputation. That includes its commitment to pro bono, in all of these forms. And a firm's professional reputation is one of the most important things it brings to court or brings to the table every time it represents a client.

Editor: If the poor are not accorded access to the justice system, could that have an erosive effect over time on the justice system itself?

Stong: It is important for people to have access to justice and to be able to get benefit[s] which they are entitled to, and to get appropriate educational opportunities for their children.

Editor: What are some of the things people can do today if they are interested in learning more about some of the organizations you have mentioned?

Stong: Two of the organizations have wonderful web sites that describe their programs and pro bono opportunities in more detail. MYF Legal Services is at www.mfy.org and the City Bar Association is at www.nybar.org.

Editor: Would you like to comment on any pro bono issues that may be of particular interest to women or new lawyers?

Stong: Pro bono activity can be good for your career development. I was involved in my first case as a second year associate in a pro bono case. I had my first argument in the Second Circuit as a fifth year associate in a pro bono case. I had the opportunity of working with the City Bar Association as a sixth year associate to draft and organize housing court information and learned how to run a meeting. There are so many ways in which you can acquire practical skills through the experience gained doing pro bono work. You must take advantage of opportunities that are available.