

Pro Bono – Organizations

Lisa Fischel-Wolovick: Serve On The Pro Bono Front Line – Be An MFY Volunteer

The Editor interviews Lisa Fischel-Wolovick, Pro Bono Coordinator and Supervising Attorney of the Family Law Unit, MFY Legal Services. This interview was conducted by Jairo Cano, a Colombian graduate of Drew University.

Editor: Can you tell us about your background?

Fischel-Wolovick: I received my law degree from CUNY Law School in 1989 and have a master's in social work from Hunter College. Before coming to MFY Legal Services, Inc., I practiced Family Law extensively, wrote a domestic violence curriculum for the New York State Police Department and helped organize the first Domestic Violence Criminal Court Part in New York State while clerking for a judge. In the Family Law Unit at MFY Legal Services, Inc. we provide representation on a full range of family law matters, including matrimonials, orders of protection, custody, visitation and support. Presently, I am the Supervising Attorney of the Family Law Unit at MFY and the Pro Bono Coordinator for the agency as well.

Editor: What are your responsibilities as pro bono coordinator for MFY?

Fischel-Wolovick: I work with lawyers who volunteer to do pro bono legal work to find ways that they can serve MFY clients that both fit into their schedules and meet our clients' needs.

Editor: What types of MFY programs are the volunteers involved with?

Fischel-Wolovick: The Guardian Ad Litem Program at MFY is a program of our Mental Health Law Project, which serves mentally disabled clients throughout the five boroughs. The Mental Health Law Project represents clients who live in assisted living situations — whether it is a single occupancy hotel room, some kind of group home, or an aftercare program. These are people who are now in supportive living centers as a result of the deinstitutionalization of the psychiatrically disabled. Their living situations are not the best and they frequently have pressing legal needs.

Our attorneys in the Mental Health Law Project are under the direction of Jeanette Zelihof who is the managing attorney of that project. We use guardians ad litem in these cases because our clients need to make complex decisions as their case proceeds. For example, decisions about whether or not there should be discovery or if they should move for summary judgement. These are decisions that clients with psychiatric disabilities may find overwhelming to make, but if the judge assigns them a guardian ad litem, the guardian can step into the client's shoes and assist them with these decisions.

If the client does not come to court, instead of the case being dismissed or a judgment being entered against them, the guardian can attend and stand in their place. Guardians meet with their clients and keep them apprised of what is happening.

Another way that volunteers can become involved is through our Divorce Project. This project provides assistance to low-income residents of Manhattan who



Lisa Fischel-Wolovick

cannot otherwise obtain a divorce. Our clients are helped by volunteers who draft papers for them and help them navigate their way through a process that is confusing and often daunting.

There are other types of opportunities. We have an exciting new Senior Lawyer Program involving attorneys who have stepped down from full-time responsibilities in other sections but want to continue representing clients on a regular basis with MFY. In addition, volunteers may handle pro bono litigation on their own. We try to offer as much supervision, training, and mentoring for our volunteers as possible. We have a very experienced staff. Some staff members have experience reaching back as far as twenty to thirty years.

Serving as a volunteer offers lawyers the satisfaction of helping an individual in need and at the same time provides them

with the kind of contact with an individual client that is frequently lacking in a corporate practice.

Editor: How do you train volunteers and handle assignments?

Fischel-Wolovick: We run a short training program for the Guardian Ad Litem Program. It is not essential, but it is helpful. Then, I match the volunteers with the clients, and the judge then reviews and approves the guardian ad litem. Judges are very receptive to accepting the volunteers that we suggest and very appreciative of the volunteers' time and commitment to our clients.

In the case of the Divorce Project, the volunteers sign up and we get in touch with them when we have a vacancy. We ask the volunteers to come to three training classes. At that point, we partner our volunteers so that they can coordinate their schedules, so that, if one cannot make every class, he or she can consult with his or her partner. Of course, we are also there to provide help after a volunteer has taken a case. Volunteers work with MFY's clients, helping draft their divorce papers and providing support through the process.

Editor: Have you made an effort to recruit in-house counsel as volunteers?

Fischel-Wolovick: We are actively seeking to recruit in-house counsel as volunteers. I recently did a presentation for ACCA at Debevoise & Plimpton. It was called "Doing Well By Doing Good: Pro Bono Opportunities for In-house Lawyers." We discussed pro bono opportunities in New York City and how in-house attorneys could volunteer. Our

Guardian Ad Litem Program and Divorce Project are ideally suited for the talents of in-house lawyers who do not have a litigation background and may not be comfortable going to court.

Editor: Has the MFY Board assisted your efforts to recruit volunteers?

Fischel-Wolovick: Yes. We have a Board of Directors that is very active and very supportive of MFY's activities. Our Chairman of the Board, David Ichel, is very supportive of our pro bono effort. We are very fortunate because many of the Board members are partners at major law firms. They have been very helpful to us in terms of coordinating their firms' pro bono efforts with our needs.

Editor: Can you name some of these firms?

Fischel-Wolovick: There are several firms that have been extremely helpful. For instance, Lisa Cleary from Patterson, Belknap has been instrumental in providing support for our programs. Ms. Cleary recently received The New York State Bar Association Root/Stimson Award for her pro bono work. Elizabeth Stong and Michael Carroll from Willkie Farr were instrumental in organizing Team MFY. Team MFY is a group of volunteers who participate in pro bono efforts as guardians ad litem or as volunteers in our Divorce Project. Board Chairman David W. Ichel and his firm Simpson Thacher have hosted two major mental health conferences on site at the firm and handled various pro bono matters. Other firms that have been particularly helpful are Davis Polk & Wardwell; Chadbourne & Parke; Cleary, Gottlieb; Debevoise & Plimpton; Morrison & Foerster; Robert & Robert; Aufrecht & Stein; Pillsbury Winthrop; Shearman & Sterling; Milbank Tweed; Wachtell, Lipton, Patterson, Belknap, Webb & Tyler and Simpson Thacher.

Editor: I understand that law firms loan associates to MFY?

Fischel-Wolovick: Law firms have funded externships. Associates from law firms work here at MFY for a four-month period. Then, when they are finished, another associate will take over their cases, so we have a four-month rotation. The firms now involved are Cleary, Gottlieb and Willkie Farr & Gallagher.

Editor: Do volunteers use their own resources or do they use MFY resources?

Fischel-Wolovick: That depends on what resources they have available. Sometimes we have volunteers from law firms who bring in resources that our office does not have. For example, if we have a case that involves extensive discovery, it is very helpful to be able to call on law firm resources.

Editor: Where can interested readers contact you for information about volunteering?

Fischel-Wolovick: They can phone me at (212) 417-3774 or e-mail me at lwolovick@mfy.org. Last year over 65 attorneys and their firms participated in MFY's pro bono initiatives.

Team MFY: A Pro Bono Program Tailored To The Needs Of Corporate Counsel

The Editor interviews Elizabeth Stong, Board Member, MFY Legal Services, Inc.; Partner, Willkie Farr & Gallagher.

Editor: You helped organize Team MFY. Does it welcome corporate counsel?

Stong: Yes. Michael Carroll, a former Willkie associate, I and others designed Team MFY projects to be flexible, so that corporate counsel who have so many unpredictable demands on their time can conveniently serve. It is also ideal for those corporate counsel who lack litigation experience and yet want to interface directly with needy clients.

Only a limited amount of special training is required and this is supplied by MFY. MFY also provides ongoing help and advice. As Lisa mentions in her interview, MFY needs volunteers to help poor people, principally women, in uncontested divorce proceedings. MFY also needs volunteers to serve as guardians ad litem to assist MFY's clients who are not able to make decisions for themselves.

Editor: I understand the Team MFY experience has other dimensions. Tell us about them.

Stong: MFY provides corporate counsel with a unique opportunity to join in a common effort with lawyers from some of the finest law firms and corporate legal departments in the city.

Not all Team MFY activities require training! Last fall, we held a benefit at a club in Manhattan, where hundreds of young and not-so-young professionals in law and other fields got together to celebrate the efforts of volunteers during the year on behalf of MFY — and just have a good time in a pleasant setting with a great group of colleagues. It was an outstanding success and will now be an annual event. It was also a wonderful way to meet, work with and enjoy good times with fellow lawyers who are also interested in using their skills to benefit the poor. We also plan to organize other occasions where members of Team MFY can get together socially to enjoy the company of fellow lawyers dedicated to serving the poor.

Editor: How do I get involved?

Stong: Just call Lisa Fischel-Wolovick. As MFY's pro bono coordinator, she does a terrific job helping volunteers become part of Team MFY.