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## David Keyko: Why Corporations Should Support MFY

*The Editor interviews David Keyko, Partner, Pillsbury Winthrop LLP, and Chairman, MFY Legal Services, Inc., a New York City-based organization that provides legal services to low-income residents of the city.*

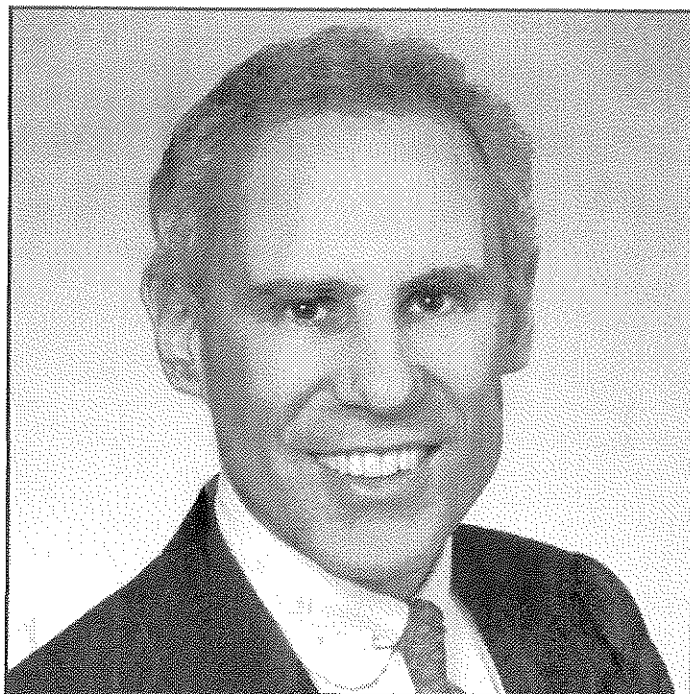
**Editor:** Could you tell us how you came to be Chairman of MFY?

**Keyko:** I have devoted a great deal of time to pro bono work, including representing a death row inmate in Alabama. I was approached by David Ichel, a director of MFY and partner at Simpson Thacher, about getting involved with MFY. At the time, I didn't know much about MFY. From others at my firm, I learned that MFY had an excellent reputation and was among the largest providers of civil legal services to the poor in New York City. I decided it was a worthwhile organization, and I agreed to join the board. One of the first activities I became involved in was a change in MFY's organizational structure from an expensive decentralized operation with offices throughout Manhattan to a centralized operation with a single location in lower Manhattan. I was co-head with Rocky Chin, another board member, of a subcommittee that focused on how to maintain MFY's contacts with the communities it served even though it would no longer have local offices. In that effort, I met a number of MFY staff members and representatives of organizations with which MFY has had longstanding ties in local communities. We determined that MFY staff should make weekly visits to each of these communities and use local organizations' offices to meet with clients and conduct screening interviews. My involvement in that process eventually led to my being asked to become vice chairman of the organization and then to assume the chairmanship, which I did at the beginning of this year.

**Editor:** What is the mission of MFY?

**Keyko:** MFY is charged primarily with helping meet the legal needs of the poor in Manhattan. But it has some citywide projects as well, such as a mental health effort that represents the needy throughout the city. In Manhattan, MFY handles cases addressing the legal needs of the poor, including housing issues, family matters, access to government programs like Social Security benefits, and legal advice on starting small businesses and employment. The organization takes a holistic approach in trying to meet all the civil legal needs of the client.

To give you an example of what we do, there was an MFY client who had been a long-time resident in an apartment. She had a great grandson who unfortunately had some drug issues. Because he was a family member, the landlord sought to evict her even though her grandson didn't live with her. Apparently, the landlord felt he could get a higher monthly rent if he could get her out and used the grandson as an excuse. When he discovered she had legal repre-



David Keyko

sentation, he realized his ploy wasn't going to work. The grandmother was able to maintain her apartment. Sometimes, simply appearing and representing someone can right an obvious injustice.

**Editor:** Why is it important for corporate counsel to support MFY?

**Keyko:** There are two primary reasons. The first is perhaps somewhat of a selfish reason – one can gain a great deal of personal satisfaction from knowing that one is doing good for those in need. I think that this is a good way to enhance the morale of the in-house legal staff. MFY has a number of interesting projects that corporate counsel can get involved in. For example, MFY has been on the front page of *The New York Times* a number of times in recent months because of the adult home work it has been doing. MFY attorneys have uncovered a series of abuses, including unnecessary operations, at adult homes, on which the *Times* has reported. The initial work was done in cooperation with outside counsel at law firms, but now there is a need for other counsel to become involved in the project as well.

The second reason for supporting MFY is that lawyers have a responsibility, given the fact that the state has permitted us the priv-

ilege to practice law, to serve the poor. One can fulfill that responsibility by working with an organization like MFY. I believe it is a satisfying way to meet that responsibility.

**Editor: Why is it important for the poor to have the kind of services that MFY offers?**

**Keyko:** MFY helps reduce the gap in accessibility to legal services. Things corporations and well-off individuals take for granted are sometimes denied to the poor. Often, part of the problem is that the poor are less sophisticated than others in their understanding of the legal system.

MFY helps the poor who have become entangled in the legal system. Perhaps their landlord is moving to evict them from their home, they may be facing employment issues, or they are seeking some government benefits and have no idea how to access those benefits. It is important that the poor understand that the legal system is there to sort things out fairly. By providing them with legal counsel, although unfortunately MFY cannot represent everyone in need, MFY helps confirm both that the legal system functions as designed and that the poor can resolve their problems through this system. Helping people successfully resolve their legal problems helps hold families together and enables MFY's clients to continue to be contributing members of society. It is difficult to function without a job or a home to live in. MFY can make a dramatic difference.

MFY's efforts actually save society money. If a person is a contributing member of society, holding down a job and maintaining a family, helping that person protect his or her legal rights costs less than having to support that person on welfare or putting the person up in a city shelter. People sometimes think that helping an organization like MFY, which among other things provides legal advice on how to access public benefits, simply increases the burden on the government. To the contrary, MFY helps people stay on their feet so that they can contribute to our society. In the long run, this is the least costly alternative.

**Editor: How can involvement in pro bono work affect a corporation's public image?**

**Keyko:** Recent accounting scandals seem to have undermined the respect that the general public has for corporations. It is unfortunate that a few large problems have made the public view business in general in a bad light. It is a little like what happened to lawyers after the Watergate scandal – the entire legal profession got a black eye.

Helping the poor, and particularly those in lower Manhattan served by MFY, shows the public that businesses are important contributors to the welfare of all. Corporate lawyers can help the poor both by encouraging their corporations to support organizations like MFY financially and by working directly with such organizations to serve the poor. The media does not only cover the scandals; it also reports on the good things that corporations do. Contributing to MFY is a wonderful way for a corporation to show that it is concerned about the welfare of society as a whole, not just its own narrow interests.

**Editor: Why should corporate counsel be particularly concerned about their corporate clients' public image?**

**Keyko:** A corporation's image can affect the company legally in at

least two ways. The public has an influence on what their elected representatives in government focus on and how they shape pending legislation. Recently, in reaction to Enron, a number of laws have been proposed to restrain the activities of corporations. If the public perceives that corporations are doing good things, that may weaken support for some of the more extreme legislation currently under consideration. Also, it is certainly useful for the jury pool to have a positive view of a company. Obviously, the image of corporations can be improved by their support for pro bono and other community welfare activities.

**Editor: The poor in the downtown area suffered greatly in the wake of September 11. Why is it particularly important for corporations located downtown for support MFY?**

**Keyko:** One of the areas that MFY is responsible for is lower Manhattan. Immediately after September 11 it sponsored a conference at my firm, Pillsbury Winthrop, on the coordination of the efforts to serve the poor of New York City who were affected by 9/11. It is important for lower Manhattan to continue to be a viable and vital area. Companies who have offices or do business in lower Manhattan have an obvious interest in the continued functioning of that neighborhood. If people living there are not able to make a go of it, the efforts to revive lower Manhattan will be crippled. I think that contributing to MFY, which serves the poor in lower Manhattan and helps them stay on their feet, is an important way to contribute to the return to vitality of an important section of New York City.

**Editor: If a corporation contributes financially to MFY, will that donation be retained by MFY for its own use?**

**Keyko:** Even though MFY is part of Legal Services of New York (LSNY), which is an umbrella organization that oversees the funding for seven different organizations located in the city, funding given to MFY is used exclusively by MFY. In fact, if one is particularly interested in a specific aspect of what MFY does, such as focusing on small businesses, helping the poor maintain their housing, or mental health issues, one can target donations and provide that funds go to a particular project. We have received many donations that are so targeted.

**Editor: What assurance would a contributor have that MFY will continue to be as effective in the future as it has in the past?**

**Keyko:** The best way to make sure one is happy with the way one's money is spent is to get involved with the organization. There are two ways to get involved with MFY. One is to join the organization's board as I have. MFY has been looking to expand the number of in-house counsel on its board. I encourage anyone interested in board involvement to contact me, Lynn Kelly, MFY's executive director, or others they may know on the board. The other is lending your legal skills and contributing financially to a specific pro bono assignment. Anyone interested in direct involvement in pro bono work may contact Bobbie Kraus at [bkraus@mfy.org](mailto:bkraus@mfy.org). She can put you in touch with the right people, either for contributing or getting involved in pro bono projects. For general information about MFY, I would recommend visiting our website at [www.mfy.org](http://www.mfy.org).

