What can Pro Bono do for YOU?

By definition, “pro bono publico” means “for the public good”. When considering pro bono legal work, most people think about helping indigent clients, providing services for those that cannot afford a private attorney, and giving back to the community. Often overlooked, however, are the benefits gained by students in performing pro bono service hours.

Pro bono service provides a plethora of benefits to law students. Many states, including New York, require applicants to perform mandatory pro bono hours before obtaining a law license. Prospective attorneys can fulfill this requirement during their time at law school while obtaining skills that will help them to become productive lawyers. By fulfilling the New York State Bar Association requirements, Syracuse Law students that perform at least fifty hours of pro bono service are recognized at SUCOL graduation!

Law school classes teach students about the law, yet they do not necessarily teach the job skills that make successful lawyers. By volunteering, students gain practical experience through filling out forms, exposure to the court system, and observation of actual client consultations. By assisting attorneys in their meeting with clients, students can learn the ways that attorneys communicate and build rapport with those that seek legal help. This is a benefit that can only be gained by practical experience and first hand observation.

While pro bono service assists those that are unable to pay for private legal help, they are not the only ones to benefit. Attorneys benefit by giving back and fulfilling their oath to provide free services and students reap benefits that are only available to those that go out and gain practical experience. When students assist lawyers in helping indigent clients, everyone involved in the process benefits. 

By Matt Crouch
STUDENT SPOTLIGHT ON…
TIM STALNAKER

3L student Tim Stalnaker takes great pride in giving back to his community. “It feels good to do something positive and help someone out,” he says. Based on Tim’s involvement with pro bono and community service activities, he must be feeling great.

Tim had an enthusiastic volunteer spirit well before going back to school. A veteran of the United States Army, Tim was recognized for his volunteer spirit with the Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal while stationed in California. Tim has been involved in the United States Army Reserves as a Soldier in the 403rd Civil Affairs Battalion in Mattydale for sixteen years and the American Legion in his home of Westernville, New York, for twelve years. The American Legion’s fundraising efforts have supported such worthy causes as the Sitrin Military Rehabilitation Program in New Hartford and the Feed-Our-Vets food pantry in Utica.

It is no surprise that Tim’s attitude of giving has propelled him into his legal career. Since January of his 1L year, Tim has volunteered with the Air Force JAG legal assistance office in Rome, New York. During this time he has written wills, provided tax assistance, and researched a variety of legal issues for low-income veterans. Along the way, he has learned substantive law and made connections with JAG officers—all of which has been a great step toward realizing his goal of serving in the JAG Corps after law school.

Tim also is a founding member of the student organization Veterans’ Issues, Support Initiative, and Outreach Network (“VISION”), and is serving as its Executive Director this year. As a member of VISION, Tim has participated in every Valor Day since the group’s founding. This year, he hopes that the event—which attracted over 140 veterans last year—grows even more. The organization is working on expanding its programming to provide even more services to veterans.

The reason behind it all is simple. “I want to be a well-rounded candidate,” Tim says, again referring to his dream job in the JAG Corps. Having been chosen as one of the first Pro Bono Scholars at Syracuse University College of Law, there is little doubt that he is on the right track.

By Mike Tyszko

For information about upcoming pro bono opportunities, contact the PBAB at probono@law.syr.edu
FACULTY SPOTLIGHT ON…
PROFESSOR TODD BERGER

Professor Berger earned a bachelor’s degree from the George Washington University and Juris Doctor from Temple University School of Law. He also earned an L.L.M. in Trial Advocacy from Temple University. Professor Berger’s experience in the public sector is extensive and it includes working as an assistant public defender with the Defender Association of Philadelphia, representing indigent defendants throughout all stages of the criminal justice system. He also taught the Criminal Defense Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania School of Law.

Professor Todd Berger is the Director of the Criminal Defense Clinic at Syracuse University College of Law that assists indigent clients facing criminal charges in the Syracuse area. The Criminal Defense Clinic runs very similarly to a Public Defender’s office. Students work in groups, and get appointed cases at arraignment. The Clinic represents clients who qualify for appointed counsel in the Syracuse area. “We represent clients from arraignment to final dispositions and sometimes even through appeal.” Said Professor Berger.

Professor Berger believes that doing Pro Bono work as a law student is essential to building strong lawyering skills such as interviewing and counseling clients, negotiating with opposing counsel, and writing motions. In addition to learning lawyering skills, Professor Berger believes that students involved in Pro Bono work learn to promote fairness by working closely with vulnerable populations who otherwise would not have access to adequate legal representation. Professor Berger perceived inequalities early in his career. As a public defender, “I truly enjoyed the work I did as a public defender. It allowed me to give a voice to people who didn’t have the opportunity to be heard in the legal system” said Professor Berger.

By Lucia Urizar
NATIONAL PRO BONO WEEK
OCTOBER 19-25, 2014

"We are bound by a responsibility to use our unique skills and training - not just to advance cases, but to serve a cause; and to help our nation fulfill its founding promise of equal justice under law...The obligation of pro bono service must become a part of the DNA of both the legal profession and of every lawyer."

-Eric Holder

Former Attorney General's address to participants at the National Pro Bono Summit on October 24, 2011 in Washington, D.C.

Upcoming Pro Bono Events:

National Pro Bono Week Panel Discussion:
October 23 Dineen Hall 12pm Room 340

Valor Day by V.I.S.I.O.N.
November 15 Dineen Hall

Contact the PBAB for more information about Talk-to-a-Lawyer Clinic volunteering opportunities!