

Pro Bono – Law Firms

A Gift From The Heart To End Violence Against Women

The Editor interviews **Howard J. Rubin**, Partner, **Shirin Keen**, Associate, **Davis & Gilbert LLP**; and **Purvi Shah**, Executive Director, **Sakhi For South Asian Women**.

Editor: Howard, how do you describe Davis & Gilbert's pro bono program?

Rubin: Davis & Gilbert has a broad pro bono program. We do pro bono work in many areas. One important area is in the arts, which is a natural outgrowth of our representation of advertising agencies and creative people. We recently represented the three major advertising trade associations in a brief to the Supreme Court on a free speech/commercial speech issue. We also represent healthcare organizations like CARE and the National Tumor Foundation. We work with religious organizations representing them in contract negotiations, real estate and other activities. The work we have done with Sakhi over the past six years is a natural outgrowth of our general pro bono program. It is the organization with which we have our most complete partnership. It grows out of our commitment to diversity and our commitment to women and their professional progress. The only real prerequisite to doing pro bono work is the will to do it. There are many ways in which people can use their time and knowledge to help organizations like Sakhi.

Editor: Please tell us about the origin of Sakhi, the meaning of its name and the organization's mission?

Shah: "Sakhi" means "woman friend" in a number of South Asian languages. Sakhi for South Asian Women began in 1989 through the efforts of five women who recognized that violence against women was an issue – yet no one was speaking out. Rather than stand by quietly, they faced the issue. The founders ensured the organization provided services to survivors while enabling community change around attitudes that perpetuate abuse. Sakhi offers crisis response, advocacy, court accompaniments, translation, as well as referrals for legal assistance, shelter, public benefits, and healthcare. We empower women via programming such as our support groups, computer classes, and financial literacy workshops which foster new skills and open options. Our service delivery works hand-in-hand with efforts to mobilize community members to respond and prevent violence via presentations, short documentaries, an annual newsmagazine, our comprehensive website (www.sakhi.org), and media advocacy. Finally, through language access work in the courts, Sakhi works to transform institutions to enable stronger responses to domestic violence.

In the past five years, Sakhi has witnessed a remarkable rise in demand for our services. Our new requests for assistance have more than tripled from 201 in 2001 to 685 in 2006. In addition, in 2006, 8.5% of our new requests were men calling on behalf of women they love – sisters, nieces, aunts, etc. This increase in Sakhi's reach demonstrates across our community more people are willing to stand up to violence.

Editor: How did Davis & Gilbert become associated with Sakhi?

Shah: Our partnership with Davis &



Howard J. Rubin



Shirin Keen



Purvi Shah

Gilbert has been fantastic. Given Sakhi's diverse methodology Davis & Gilbert has been involved in a number of arenas. First, the firm has assisted via legal service delivery to survivors. Law firms and anti-violence organizations have a natural conjunction because redress often happens via the legal system. In addition, as an organization, Sakhi itself has legal business matters. Employment law is one area where Davis & Gilbert has been very helpful to us including by helping with our employment procedures and immigration sponsorship cases. Finally, Davis & Gilbert has given a tremendous amount of financial support and provided space for activities such as our press conference. Partners and their families and friends have supported our annual benefit gala. In fact, the wife of a Davis & Gilbert partner co-chaired this year's event.

Editor: Howard, would you care to comment on how the firm has supported Sakhi?

Rubin: We began our relationship by learning more about the organization and becoming a contributor. Then we started doing the employment-related pro bono work and provided facilities. Coincidentally, Shirin Keen, one of our litigation associates, had represented an individual Sakhi client in a legal matter which gave us the opportunity to redouble our efforts on their behalf – giving us a sense of closeness to the organization we were supporting as we provided useful services to them and to their clients.

Editor: Shirin, tell us about your involvement with Sakhi.

Keen: I first became familiar with Sakhi when I moved to New York in 2001. I was very interested in the organization because I had moved from Pakistan and was very impressed that it was doing local work at the grassroots level with the New York community. I thought it was a good way to learn about the city and to develop my interest in the law, women's rights and immigration issues. I trained as a Sakhi volunteer, which was a six-month process. I learned about different legal services and community resources in the city. I started working and mentoring individual clients of Sakhi. When I completed law school and began working at a law firm, I handled a case of a Bangladeshi woman who was married to a U.S. citizen. Unfortunately, she was abused in that marriage. She was determined to have an education and a future for herself. I was referred to her case through Sanctuary for Families which is a partner organization of Sakhi. I started working on a petition to grant her immigration status based on the abuse. A month ago my client was granted immigration status as a legal permanent resident.

When I moved to Davis & Gilbert, I

mentioned that I was working on this case and wanted to continue. It was a pleasant coincidence that Davis & Gilbert had already been involved with Sakhi, assuring me that the firm was a good fit for me in terms of my interest in litigation and IP while allowing me to pursue my pro bono interests.

Editor: How does the firm's pro bono work affect recruitment of associates?

Rubin: We want to attract associates who have interests in diverse communities. The majority of what we do is for large corporations, but we like to hire people with a commitment to their own community who can come here and spend part of their time working on and advancing their individual commitments. Rather than have a top-down pro bono program in which the firm works only on the projects of senior partners, we encourage associates to be able to pursue their own commitments and interests, and the firm is glad to support them in their efforts in diverse communities.

For example, last year we participated in the corporate read aloud program where 30 lawyers went to an elementary school in Harlem to read to second graders three times. We also provided the money to buy books for them. At the end of the session each child had six books that we contributed.

Editor: How do Sakhi's support groups work?

Shah: Our monthly support group is based around a peer/mentor model and we have had discussions on issues such as anger management and setting boundaries as well as activities including a self-defense workshop. Our support groups provide a way for women who are at various stages in their relationships, from various social classes and religions, to meet other women with similar or different struggles. Together they can strategize about building their futures. Women realize they are not alone — that there are ways to cope and move forward. Our support groups offer women a safe space, comfort, and much-needed validation in a world which still makes it easier to condone abuse than confront it.

Editor: Is domestic violence more prevalent in the South Asian community than in other communities?

Shah: Domestic violence happens across all communities, all cultures, and all classes. While it occurs everywhere, domestic violence has different manifestations in the South Asian community than in the mainstream community. In the South Asian community the extended family is very important. Sometimes the partner may not be abusive. It may be other family members. The other key difference is that South Asian immigrant women face additional challenges such as language barriers, lack of awareness of one's rights, and gaps in immigration remedies.

To complement this service delivery, we conduct policy advocacy to strengthen

institutional response to domestic violence such as our campaign to improve court interpretation. For immigrant survivors not proficient in English, language access is a huge issue. When survivors go through the court system pursuing vital life needs such as maintenance, custody, or divorce, failure to have an adequate court interpreter can result in not receiving justice – and altering their lives and their children's lives forever. Sakhi's efforts in this arena have made a remarkable impact. Our advocacy motivated the New York State Office of Court Administration to roll out an action plan on court interpretation in 2006 and implement changes such as mandatory testing in English, a raise for per diem interpreters, and mandatory training.

Editor: How can more attorneys and community members get involved in ending violence?

Shah: Everyone can work to end violence. Each of us is affected by domestic violence – whether it is through our own experiences or the experiences of a family member, friend, colleague, or neighbor. So we all have to take a stand against abuse. At the very least, each of us can help spread information. Pass on Sakhi's news-magazine or brochures or a link to our website. Second, lend professional expertise. If you are an attorney or healthcare provider, offer pro bono or sliding scale services through our networks. Third, if you have time, join our volunteer development committee or finish our 30-hour training in order to assist with our programming. Given our size, Sakhi relies on volunteers to expand our reach. Volunteers not only assist with classes and workshops but also offer emotional support. This simple act of caring makes a huge difference in helping to raise self-esteem for women who have been constantly belittled.

Sakhi is in the business of transformation – of individuals, our communities, and institutions. The process of working with survivors and Sakhi is itself a life-changing experience. Volunteers and community members realize how strong survivors are – and how challenging the institutional and community barriers can be.

Editor: How is Sakhi financed?

Shah: Like many non-profits, Sakhi relies upon diverse revenue streams including corporate, foundation, government, and individual support. In the past few years, as the demand for Sakhi's services has increased, our budget has grown through tremendous effort from our board, staff, and community supporters. While we do have a number of corporations that support our special events, which constitute approximately one-half to two-thirds of our budget in any given year, only a small percentage provide grants and other support. We would like to see more non-event corporate support which currently comprises less than 3% of our budget.

Editor: Howard, any final thoughts?

Rubin: Our support of Sakhi is one example of how Davis & Gilbert promotes a broad sense of diversity within the firm – that we support people and organizations in different communities. This is a productive relationship that we are very proud of and we hope that it is useful to Sakhi as well.

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