

Pro Bono – Law Firms

Pro Bono Work – Helping Dreams Come True

The Editor interviews **Miriam Buhl**, Pro Bono Counsel at Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP.

Editor: Miriam, please describe for our readers your mission as Pro Bono Counsel at Weil Gotshal.

Buhl: My job at Weil is to help the firm achieve the best possible presence in the pro bono community by finding the best opportunities for the firm's lawyers to contribute their legal skills to those in need in a way that is consistent with the firm's overall quality of service and professionalism.

Editor: Why has the firm designed a pro bono policy committed to writing, which makes clear the obligations of all attorneys to perform pro bono service?

Buhl: I believe the firm has done this because it codifies Weil Gotshal's institutionalized dedication to serving the community. It holds us accountable to our own goal and reminds us of what we need to do. I think any firm would agree that it's sometimes hard to achieve that goal, but we have set a high standard and make every effort to meet it.

Editor: Last year, Steve Reiss, chair of Weil Gotshal's Pro Bono Committee, likened your work to that of chairing a foundation. You oversee a vast array of programs, pro bono activity, relationships with pro bono organizations, and orchestrate orientation for new associates and lateral hires, etc. How do you manage to oversee all that goes on in Weil's many offices, both stateside and abroad?

Buhl: The firm has developed a strong infrastructure within Weil Gotshal for the pro bono program that helps us stay connected to all of the attorneys who are working on pro bono matters. We accomplish this by way of our governance model, which is to have a committee that includes senior members of every department and every practice group. That committee meets every six weeks, just as a board of directors would. Having pro bono committee members present and accountable for the pro bono performance of each of those offices has helped us enormously to broaden the reach of the firm's pro bono initiative. I work with the pro bono committee members in every office to make sure that they are connected to the best possible providers of pro bono legal services in their communities and that they are also developing relationships with non-profits and other organizations we want to support.

Editor: What is your reporting relationship?

Buhl: I report to the committee as a whole when it meets every six weeks; I consider them to be my board of directors in keeping with the model of a foundation. I do report weekly to Steve Reiss and his co-chair John Strasburger on administrative and on other matters that need their approval on an expedited basis. We are also very lucky that we have adopted the new Probono.net database called Pro Bono Manager, which we have dubbed internally The Pro Bono Hotspot. It serves as a repository of critical information about our pro bono work, helping me to manage our pro bono projects and mak-

ing sure that everybody is engaged in pro bono and that there aren't any outliers – those tempted to do 100 percent pro bono work to those who aren't doing any.



Editor: What new programs have been developed since last year?

Buhl: An exciting project started by the New York office is a housing court project in conjunction with the Legal Aid Society. A number of attorneys are training under Legal Aid supervision. Housing court is the last holdout in the pro bono world – nobody wants to go there. For the Legal Aid Society, having a firm help represent tenants has been a big help. We hope to build a larger team and a model that Legal Aid can use for other firms as well.

On the national front, we have stepped up our engagement in veteran's matters, working at a number of levels to assist veterans from several conflicts, not just the most recent. We have learned a great deal in developing our work, especially in our Silicon Valley, Washington DC and New York offices in coordination with not-for-profits serving veterans. People who are inclined to assist those that serve their country are sometimes stunned to learn that there is a significant lag time between the service and the time in which benefits claims are resolved, and the bureaucracy is remarkably complicated. We have built a veterans' team within the firm with a group that meets on a periodic basis to review matters.

Nearly all of our U.S. offices are involved with the huge new Holocaust reparations project aiding German ghetto survivors apply for compensation from the German government. There are literally dozens of firms involved with the project, which originated with Bet Tzedek Legal Services in Los Angeles, and we're especially proud to be playing a lead role in coordinating clinics in major US cities.

Another inter-firm project that Weil is helping to lead is the new Oxfam Law Firm Consortium, a group of premier international firms that offers Oxfam legal and intellectual resources for Oxfam's work combating global poverty.

We've developed a fascinating new international project with Human Rights Watch to assist in monitoring three active cases before the International Criminal Court in the Hague: The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, and Sudan. Weil Gotshal fields a large, inter-office team to provide oral and written updates to HRW's country representatives, draft summaries of hearings, and so on.

Editor: Have you continued to promote the externships among your outstanding young associates and pro bono organizations?

Buhl: Externships are terrific experiences for attorneys, who are able to gain hands-on experience. One of our most recent initiatives was to engage two externs with the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund where they worked on major civil rights litigation. We also have sent externs to the Legal Aid Society's East Harlem community law office to assist local small businesses. We continue to participate with the Dallas

Lead-a-Lawyer program, which we began; it's now a rotation between several firms and has been a great experience for lawyers out of Dallas. Our summer associates also get involved with brief externships, which are always very popular.

The outcomes are different because the work varies so markedly. For example, with the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund there might be one major case that the extern worked on, whereas at the Legal Aid Society community law office there are several matters per day that the attorney might address. We ask the supervising externship attorneys to evaluate each extern on a number of levels: the quality of work, the commitment, the professionalism, the type of skills developed and the direct experience that they had with particular matters and what those outcomes were from their work. We have never had a bad report. We have a long waiting list of attorneys who would like to do this: it's a coveted spot.

Editor: Who is responsible for selecting the projects and pro bono agencies with whom you work? What criteria are used?

Buhl: The responsibility lies with me to review the organization and make sure it's one we want to work with because there are so many not-profits, and any unusual requests are run by the Pro Bono Committee co-chairs and, if necessary, the Committee. We encourage all attorneys and all staff to let us know if they have particular relationships with organizations with which they wish to get involved. We're mindful of the scarcity of our own resources and make sure that they are best directed in the most effective way.

Editor: How do you handle the situation where a pro bono matter begins to consume more hours and more of the firm's resources than originally planned?

Buhl: We are very candid about the fact that some high-profile matters are likely to consume a lot of hours and resources, but it's rare that they consume more than were originally planned. We are ready for all eventualities when we undertake a matter. That said, certainly when we review the possibility of taking on a class action or a death penalty litigation, we do review the likely costs involved and make sure that everybody is comfortable with that before committing to it.

Editor: Please tell our readers about the many honors accorded your London office.

Buhl: Our London office is a star in the Weil Gotshal pro bono firmament despite the fact that it is a modestly-sized office – of a U.S. firm – in the London law firm community, competing with the Magic Circle firms. They have been able to secure relationships with leading worldwide humanitarian organizations like Oxfam and Plan International; Child Line is another well-known UK charity. The success of that office is due in no small part to the fact that the London office is so committed from the very top down to pro bono. The head of the office, Michael Francies, is exemplary in his own pro bono work. They also have a great committee which reviews not only pro bono work but also philanthropic commitments and public service engagements.

Their engagement with a project is three-fold: funding, volunteer work and pro bono legal services. Their team is very connected to the community and remarkably committed.

Editor: How have you been able to educate foreign lawyers to the need to perform pro bono work?

Buhl: There has been a huge change in the pro bono performance of our offices abroad in the last five years, but it is definitely a two-way education process. We learn a lot from our non-U.S. colleagues about how things are done elsewhere. There are vast differences from country to country in how attorneys, as well as the community, consider pro bono work. In some countries, it can interfere with statutorily regulated fee structures. In other countries, it is assumed that the government will take care of the needs of the underserved. We have had to assess those differences and try to figure out what is the best way for Weil Gotshal to be present in helping the community. While we have looked to our offices to guide us to determine the best possible way to engage our local lawyers, we have also found it helpful to connect with other firms through pro bono networks that have developed in Frankfurt, Paris, Prague, and elsewhere. We're all learning about the community. Sometimes it turns out that long-held assumptions are false – that legal needs of the underserved are not really appropriate for us to work on, or that they are met by the government. There is a great organization in Europe, the Public Interest Law Initiative, which has been very helpful in developing some strong relationships with pro bono clearinghouses, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. They have initiated a European pro bono conference – the first was last fall and the second will be this fall, in Budapest. I have been on the planning committee for both and am learning firsthand how we can be a bigger player in the pro bono community.

Editor: "Pro bono is embedded in the culture of Weil Gotshal" is a statement in one of the firm's past interviews. Please elaborate on why this is so.

Buhl: It is now fully woven into every aspect of the firm's culture, from recruitment to retirement, from business development to professional development. The firm's pro bono work is a source of great pride to attorneys at Weil and an important part of their development as lawyers – and as human beings.

I enjoy a view of the firm that very few people have: I see the tremendous dedication and hard work that our lawyers throughout the firm put into helping people in need. It's an amazing picture. The types of work that we do are so varied – some are little matters for one person but they mean the world to that person; others are huge class actions or major initiatives that will potentially help thousands of people. Pro bono work takes our lawyers outside of their day-to-day practice and puts them in a place where they can effect change in an equally meaningful but wholly different way from their usual work. It also helps them connect to their families and their communities in a more direct way. Pro bono is the stuff that makes lawyers feel like lawyers.

Please email the interviewee at miriam.buhl@weil.com with questions about this interview.