

SPECIAL REPORT

Pro Bono

Nonprofits And Corporate Counsel Partner In Merger Success *Volunteer Attorneys Assist Organizations Focused On Children*

The idea of joining forces with another like-minded non-profit organization that serves Connecticut children first came to Operation Respect-CT Co-Founder & President Donna Collins about two years ago. The end result, a merger with the Governor's Prevention Partnership, which was official in May, was largely due to pro bono representation by corporate counsel from UnitedHealthcare and Pratt & Whitney and a unique pro bono legal assistance organization, the Pro Bono Partnership.

With its main focus on creating safe, non-bullying environments for school-children, Collins was seeing a significant increase in demand for services since Operation Respect-CT was started in 2001.

"We were definitely growing and began to asking ourselves, 'can we operate better?'" said Collins.

Originally founded by Peter Yarrow, of the folk music trio Peter, Paul & Mary, Operation Respect was a national initiative to reduce bullying and other violence in schools through various teaching workshops and programs. Their premiere program is Don't Laugh At Me, which trains students and school staff in conflict management, problem-solving and other simi-

lar skills.

In pursuit of a partnership that Collins and the late Operation Respect-CT Board President John Klein believed would be appropriate, based on their own pre-determined criteria, they reached out to 30 nonprofit organizations before determining that the Governor's Prevention Partnership was the best match due to its more developed infrastructure, as well as similar initiatives and goals, including its own Bullying Task Force. Organized in 1989, the Governor's Prevention Partnership is a collaboration between state government and business leaders to help ensure safety and drug-free environments for children within schools, communities and youth organizations. Their programs also include underage drinking prevention, youth mentoring, and dissemination of anti-drug messages through the media.

"We wanted to approach this as two nonprofits coming together to leverage our resources and services. It seemed to us that this coming together was a natural and efficient course to take, and that our organization and services complemented the Governor's Prevention Partnership," said Collins.

Once the Governor's Prevention Partnership was on board and committed in the fall of 2008, the next step was to efficiently and effectively make their merger official. The leadership of the Governor's Prevention Partnership suggested they approach a legal organization dedicated to supporting nonprofit organizations with free legal services – the Pro Bono Partnership - to make it happen.

Headquartered in White Plains, NY, the Pro Bono Partnership, itself a 501(c)(3) charity, provides free legal services, educational workshops and other legal resources to nonprofit organizations in Connecticut, New Jersey and Westchester, Orange, Putnam and Rockland Counties, New York. The Partnership's clients are organizations serving poor or disadvantaged individuals, providing important social services, or arts and civic organizations, or environmental and conservation groups. The attorneys in corporations and law firms who are part of their 1,700-member, volunteer network are provided a wide range of opportunities to work on various pro bono business and transactional matters.

To assist with this merger, the director of the Pro Bono Partnership's Hartford, CT, program, Priya Morganstern, coordinated volunteer attorneys from two of Connecticut's largest companies, UnitedHealthcare and Pratt & Whitney. The attorneys from UnitedHealthcare represented the Governor's Prevention Partnership and the Pratt & Whitney attorneys assisted Operation Respect-CT. Requisite waivers were obtained from both organizations, to allow Pro Bono Partnership to represent both sides in the merger.

The executive leadership and board of



Richard S. Hobish, Executive Director, Pro Bono Partnership

directors for both the Governor's Prevention Partnership and Operation Respect-CT recognized that because of the pro bono support provided through the Pro Bono Partnership neither nonprofit would be required to sacrifice critical resources that would otherwise go towards community programs.

"This merger was inevitably going to allow both of these nonprofit organizations to become stronger," said John Aissis, associate general counsel for UnitedHealthcare. Aissis and his colleague Terri Fontaine, associate general counsel, represented the Governor's Prevention Partnership in the merger. "These organizations would have been in a difficult position financially if they had to pay legal fees over the course of the several months it took to work this through. They may have had to wait it out or not even allow it to happen in the first place," said Aissis.

For the next six months, the Pro Bono Partnership team of attorneys worked through the requisite documents from both organizations, as well as numerous logistical issues including whether the organizations would come together in one location or remain at two different addresses. (Operation Respect-CT will move into the Governor's Prevention Partnership headquarters.) The attorneys point out that there were no major obstacles to the merger, and that they were able to successfully spearhead the project by making sure that both organizations had the information and tools they needed to move forward once the merger was complete.

"The Pro Bono Partnership was very helpful in navigating the process and really involved in all the moving pieces,"

says Collins. "We were like two baby organizations with these two teams of powerhouse attorneys thanks to the Partnership," she said.

On May 31 the merger was official, and both sides say they are excited to work as one in serving children and families in Connecticut.

"The merger was a smooth process and we are really happy with the result, which is two strong nonprofit entities coming together," said Jill Spinetti, executive director of the Governor's Prevention Partnership. "We are fortunate to have the history and the knowledge base that Operation Respect-CT brings to our organization."

The merger also marks another successful project for the Pro Bono Partnership, which has taken on approximately 4,000 legal matters for 1,400 nonprofit organizations since 1997.

"The merger of the Governor's Prevention Partnership and Operation Respect-CT is an ideal example of what the Pro Bono Partnership is all about," said Richard S. Hobish, Executive director of the Pro Bono Partnership. "With the legal expertise of our dedicated volunteer team, we were able to navigate, support and implement a successful merger, ultimately benefiting the communities served by these outstanding organizations."

For more information about the Pro Bono Partnership, Inc., please contact Lisa Rosenbloom or Dina Ramon at lrosenbloom@probonopartner.org or dramon@probonopartner.org with questions about the article. They may be reached at Pro Bono Partnership, Inc., 237 Mamaronck Avenue, Suite 300, White Plains, NY 10605.

HIGHLIGHTS

Law Firms

The Benefits Of A Coordinated And Focused Pro Bono Program Dana Ferestien WILLIAMS
KASTNER Page 46

A Firm Whose Lawyers Live Pro Bono Interview: Steve Schulman AKIN GUMP STRAUSS HAUER & FELD LLP* Page 47

Advancing Pro Bono To The Next Level Interview: Kenneth H. Zimmerman and Melissa Toner Lozner LOWENSTEIN SANDLER PC* Page 48

King & Spalding: Pro Bono Making A Difference At Home And Abroad Interview: Bill Hoffman KING & SPALDING LLP* Page 49

Pro Bono – A Top Priority At Proskauer Interview: Scott Harshbarger and Stacey Fahey PROSKAUER ROSE LLP* Page 50

Some Of The Above Partner With Corporate Counsel By Providing Us With Financial And Editorial Support.

* Supporting Law Firms