

# Up and Coming Attorneys Help Legal Aid Thrive

By *Dianna Parker Howie*

Each day, members of our community encounter legal barriers to housing, employment, childcare, medical coverage and other basic human needs. The Legal Aid Society of Columbus is charged with meeting these civil legal needs for those who cannot afford representation. With our funding at an all-time low, LASC is exploring how we can more strategically and efficiently deliver legal services, while also engaging more volunteers, particularly those attorneys who are new to the practice of law.

This article explores new attorney pro bono participation, shared through the perspective of 10 outstanding “new” attorneys who volunteer with LASC: Anna Sanyal, Andrew Peiffer, Kwame Christian, Jesse Branner, Jason Gerken, Lynda Clark, Ryan Sander, Eric Becker, Sheena Bateman-Carothers and Michalea Delaveris.

## **We have a professional responsibility to ensure access to justice.**

Paragraph six of the preamble to the Ohio Rules of Professional Conduct urges all attorneys to “devote professional time and resources and use civic influence to ensure equal access to our system of justice.” This call to action encourages all practitioners—regardless of their areas of practice—to help our most vulnerable citizens. Families in shelters trying to find safe, affordable housing, victims of domestic violence fighting to cut marital ties with their abusers without sacrificing their children’s financial stability, military veterans struggling to reenter society free of criminal records or overwhelming debt, adults with life-threatening conditions forced to navigate red tape to obtain medical coverage for medication, accommodations or surgery, and home-bound senior citizens frightened by calls from debt collectors threatening to throw them into debtors’ prisons—these are the stories of the people in our community seeking access to justice. These are the clients who are helped when attorneys meet the Preamble’s challenge.

2014 Moritz graduate Andrew Peiffer accepted a position with Student Legal Services at The Ohio State University after graduation, but before he had even taken the July bar exam, he contacted LASC and asked how he could help. Andrew, who now volunteers as a licensed attorney at the Faith Mission brief advice clinic, explains how pro bono fulfills his professional obligation. “I became a lawyer so that I could work in the service of others. As attorneys, the service we provide is a vital one, and I believe that our unique qualification to provide it obligates us to provide it for those whose need exceeds their ability to pay for it.”

Local law schools instill this expectation in their students, as evidenced by increasing student pro bono participation. Ryan Sander donated more than 550 hours to LASC during law school at Capital University, where he earned his JD in 2014. Now working in compliance at a private firm, he volunteers after work at local clinics. He notes, “The need for an advocate and someone who cares and listens is something everyone can relate to regardless of socioeconomic status.”

## **Pro Bono satisfies your internal call to action.**

In addition to their ethical motivations, many attorneys who volunteer through LASC-sponsored clinics are drawn to service through faith. Lynda Clark, who works for the Franklin County Clerk of Courts, describes her motivation to volunteer at the clinic at New Salem Missionary Baptist Church, where she is also a member. “I believe that having been blessed to earn a law degree I should be a blessing to those less fortunate.” Led by Moritz professor Vincene Verdun, New Salem church partnered with LASC in 2012 after recognizing that low-income members of the Linden community had unmet legal needs, and their church happened to have many attorney members.

Others are drawn to pro bono by their own internal motivations. Anna Sanyal, who works in compliance at JP Morgan Chase, was raised in an immigrant family that espoused the Horatio Alger “bootstraps” worldview. Her decision to volunteer was inspired after attending a “Bridges Out of Poverty” training session—a program that raises awareness about the sometimes hidden obstacles facing low-income people—that single-handedly changed her worldview forever. She recalls, “I realized that despite being a hard worker, without the proper education, guidance and resources, it is hard to break the cycle of generational poverty. More importantly, I learned that we all need to support each other during times of need in order to have a vibrant and successful community.”

LASC finds working with 20-something attorneys to completely defy the somewhat negative stereotypes associated with the millennial generation. These new attorneys set aside significant portions of their free time and find ongoing motivation by personally witnessing the concrete impact on their clients’ lives. Kwame Christian graduated from Moritz in 2013 and started his career working in policy and research at the Kirwan Institute at OSU. His experience at the New Salem clinic is illustrative. “Beyond legal advice, we give clients the opportunity to be heard. A number of my clients just wanted to talk to someone who would take the time to listen and validate their emotions. This emotional validation can, in some instances, be just as important as the practical legal advice we provide.”

## **You will learn so many new skills that will make you a better lawyer.**

Although our new lawyers cite the desire to help and satisfy ethical expectations as the primary motivators, the secondary benefits to their careers are undeniable. Sheena Bateman-Carothers, a 2013 Akron Law graduate, was drawn to pro bono initially as a networking tool. After assisting with brief advice clinics, Sheena started volunteering in-house with the LASC Domestic Team, donating more than 160 hours in 2014. Working closely with her LASC mentor Kathi Shear, Sheena gained experience in family law, previously unfamiliar to her. “I have been able to interview clients, write various pleadings and motions and represent



*Bateman-Carothers*



*Becker*



*Branner*



*Christian*



*Clark*



*Delaveris*



*Gerken*



*Peiffer*



*Sander*



*Sanyal*

domestic violence victims in Civil Protection Orders,” she notes. Sheena also recognizes that despite her primary goal of practicing criminal law, her practice has been enhanced by understanding the civil law overlap for issues such as domestic violence.

For attorneys like Lynda Clark, who accepted a non-legal position during the economic downturn, pro bono participation is essential to maintaining a connection to the practice of law and one’s continuing legal education. “I want to make sure that I use my legal skills at all possible times,” she explains. Lynda credits free Continuing Legal Education programming sponsored by LASC and opportunities to exercise her skills from law school.

Even new practitioners with legal jobs can develop practical and fundamental skills through pro bono. Andrew Peiffer relates, “As a new attorney, I am learning every day how much cannot be learned in a classroom. The professional benefit of my pro bono experience is a crash-course in a variety of legal topics, as well as the development of important practical skills, such as communicating with clients, managing expectations and, all too often, delivering bad news.”

While studying at OSU Moritz, Michalea Delaveris started volunteering at the LASC-sponsored YWCA Family Center clinic. Now an associate at BakerHostetler, her volunteer work continues to serve as an excellent training ground to develop core competencies. “On a professional level, pro bono experience has been critical to growing subject matter and skills proficiency. Brief advice clinics have helped me learn to research efficiently, communicate effectively with clients and develop an internal due diligence checklist to spot-check my own advice.”

Like the clinic volunteers, attorneys who litigate pro bono cases referred by LASC can also build skills. Jason Gerken joined Porter Wright as a new litigation associate in 2013. Last year, he began accepting pro bono cases from LASC’s Volunteer Resource Center, taking advantage of his firm’s policy of matching new associates with experienced volunteers who mentor and co-counsel. Jason acknowledges, “As a young associate at a large firm, it can be difficult in

the normal course of business to find opportunities to interact with clients and opposing counsel, or to truly run a case from start to finish, but pro bono work affords those opportunities.”

**You can meet attorneys who will help you become a better lawyer.**

We all appreciate a good firm reception or cocktail hour, but pro bono participation can serve as a non-traditional, organic networking opportunity for new lawyers. Eric Becker of Squire Patton Boggs was drawn to pro bono by his Supreme Court mentor Jim Abrams of Taft Stettinius & Hollister, who encouraged Eric to volunteer at clinics to gain involvement in the local legal community.

Interactions at brief advice clinics also lead to valuable mentoring relationships for new attorneys. Kwame Christian is building a solo practice, and through the New Salem clinic, he engages with other pro bono attorneys, many of whom have years of experience as private practitioners. Kwame notes, “You form real and lasting connections with your fellow volunteers.”

Pro bono case representation also affords new lawyers in large offices outside access to members of their firms. By co-counseling with more senior attorneys on cases referred by the LASC Volunteer Resource Center, Jesse Branner, who joined Bricker & Eckler in 2013, uses her pro bono cases to “strengthen relationships with partners and other attorneys in the firm.”

**You are not alone.**

Stepping into the unknown can be scary—especially for those of us who worked so hard to obtain a law license. Delving into unfamiliar substantive areas is daunting, but this lack of poverty law expertise is not an insurmountable challenge. Legal Aid provides training, mentors, research, handbooks and sample pleadings. Ryan Sander comments, “The pro bono training given by LASC is very helpful and more than enough to help at brief advice clinics. For full

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representation, although there may be a learning curve, you will find there are plenty of attorneys who are willing to help you gain the knowledge you need to successfully advocate for your client.”

Clinics are excellent training grounds for new attorneys. Andrew Peiffer acknowledges that LASC clinics staffed by multiple volunteers are ideal because “even inexperienced attorneys can gain experience in a safe way.”

### **Pro bono is worth your time.**

All attorneys are busy. New attorneys—many of whom are starting families, building practices and developing professional reputations—are swamped.

Eric Becker describes his approach to this challenge. “Particularly for private sector attorneys, time is the one non-replenishing resource everyone wishes they had more of. But keeping an organized schedule—utilizing calendar and scheduling tools—is the best way to reserve time for volunteering while completing one’s work related obligations.”

New attorneys should also be realistic about how much time they can commit. “Give yourself permission to start slow,” advises Jesse Branner. “Brief advice clinics are a great starting point – you show up for a few hours, talk to clients and leave. This is often issue spotting and directing clients to the appropriate services, and you don’t take any of the clients with you.”

Anna Sanyal agrees, “I make a realistic time commitment that I can actually honor. For me, that is usually one or two nights a month. Because I primarily volunteer at clinics

which usually occur after the work day, I am able to balance both.”

For those who handle cases referred from LASC, developing one’s own pro bono niche helps ensure that the undertaking is still manageable. Jesse took several VRC consumer cases in a row. “I suggest finding a type of case that you are comfortable with and focusing on those. You become more efficient with representing clients when you understand exactly what the process will look like.”

Clients come to LASC and the local clinics because they are in crisis and are struggling to maintain their daily living necessities. A few hours of attorney volunteer time makes a significant impact on a client’s livelihood. Jason Gerken addresses how and why he manages to carve out time despite his aggressive schedule. “It’s very easy to make time when you realize that your client’s problem is his or her own version of ‘bet-the-company’ litigation. When that becomes clear, working through lunch, staying late, or coming in to the office on the weekend is a small sacrifice to make.”

### **You will enjoy it.**

In the end, pro bono work is about the people you are helping, and helping people feels really good. “Each one of my pro bono clients has been incredibly grateful, and truly appreciates what we are able to accomplish for them,” Jesse reflects. “Even if we don’t arrive at the desired result, they always say thank you and recognize our effort.”

In 2014, 99 attorneys with admission dates since 2010 donated more than 2800 hours to LASC. This number is more than 50 percent of the total hours donated by pro bono attorneys to LASC, even though they make up less than one-third of the total volunteer roster. As each of our outstanding volunteers highlighted today ultimately leaves the “new attorney” category, LASC looks forward to working with new graduates who can help ensure access to justice in our community.

## **The Columbus Medical Association Foundation**

A unique 501(c)(3) partnership of physicians and the community that can assist your clients in fulfilling their charitable interest in the medical and health and wellness arena.

**For more information on the Foundation, its charitable options and services, contact**

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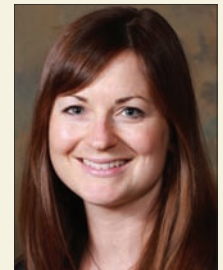
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