

In Their Words: Attorneys' Most Memorable Pro Bono Work

By **Kevin Penton**

Law360 (October 26, 2023, 4:55 PM EDT) -- Attorneys make a difference for their clients every day, but there's something about working on a pro bono matter that can lead to particularly memorable experiences for lawyers.

Attorneys working on pro bono cases often take the skills they've honed from their regular practices and zero in on access to justice issues, at times taking on subject matters that have particular personal significance to them.

While some firms focus on the big swings that can lead to positive change for many, other lawyers zero in on individual cases involving people who are going through difficult moments in their lives and who need help.

Here, during the American Bar Association's annual National Week of Pro Bono, attorneys from six law firms share their memories of some of the more memorable pro bono matters they have taken on.

These quotes have been edited for length and clarity:



Marney Cheek

Co-chair of Covington & Burling LLP's international arbitration practice

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, I was in The Hague, the Netherlands, with Ukrainian colleagues. The situation was truly surreal. Bombs were falling on Kyiv. The Ukrainians were calling home to check on loved ones and trying to figure out how to get back into a country that many were

trying to flee for their own safety. But in the middle of that despair and chaos, there was also a call for quick international legal action.

My Covington colleagues and I immediately got in touch with our longtime client, Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to think through how international law could be used to check Russia's aggression. Just two days after Russia's full-scale invasion, we filed an application and request for provisional measures (interim relief) with the International Court of Justice. We argued that Russia had violated the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, by relying on false claims of genocide in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region to justify its full scale invasion of Ukraine. When we filed, no one knew the course the war would take. What we did know is that international law had a role to play in fighting Russian aggression.

The world court granted our request for interim relief and in March 2022 ordered Russia to suspend all military operations in and against Ukraine. This was a tremendous legal and moral victory for Ukraine. And while Russia has refused to respect that court order, Ukraine's case is moving forward, and it is seeking reparations for Russia's continued violations of international law.

It has been an honor and a privilege to represent Ukraine pro bono in its fight for justice. And we remain committed to working hand and glove with our Ukrainian colleagues to achieve victory and accountability for Ukraine.



Elena Coyle

Co-head of Skadden Arps Meagher & Flom LLP's insurance M&A and reinsurance practices

As an associate in 2011, I began working with two other associates and the late Steve Kolleeny on a pro bono matter representing a Tibetan immigrant. Fleeing persecution and wrongful imprisonment in China for having openly practiced his Buddhist faith and spoken out against the oppression of Tibetan people by the Chinese government, Mr. X traveled through Nepal and then on to India before boarding a plane to the United States and surrendering at the border to declare his intent to seek asylum.

When we met Mr. X, he was being held at an ICE detention center, which was a traumatic experience for him given his prior wrongful imprisonment and torture in China. We represented Mr. X in being paroled from the detention center, establishing his work authorization, in his removal proceedings and, upon being granted asylum, we continued to advise him through receipt of his green card and ultimately in his naturalization. After a more than 12-year engagement, Mr. X finally became a U.S. citizen in the summer of 2023. We have also stood behind him as he established and grew a successful restaurant, where he serves Tibetan-inspired dishes as well as sushi.

Mr. X's story is the embodiment of the American Dream. It has been a privilege to represent him for

more than a decade. His resolve and strength in the face of such adversity were an inspiration to me and the entire team, and motivated us to persevere despite all obstacles. No matter how busy we are, as advocates, we can all play a part in serving those in need.



John Lavelle

Partner with Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Morgan Lewis partnered with Community Legal Services to obtain relief for hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvania households denied emergency food assistance as the result of a faulty interpretation by the United States Department of Agriculture of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act.

Passed by Congress in 2020, the legislation authorized additional monthly financial assistance to help households receiving [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] benefits during the public health emergency. The USDA interpreted the new law, however, to deprive the poorest SNAP beneficiaries of any emergency allotments. By coupling the firm's deep litigation resources with CLS' insights on the SNAP program and anti-hunger expertise, we helped secure more than \$700 million of critical benefits for Pennsylvanians who had been wrongly deprived of them during the pandemic.

SNAP recipients had already been deeply impacted by the economic challenges posed by the pandemic, and I found it particularly rewarding to be able to help so many people at a time of such great need. I have had the great pleasure of working with Morgan Lewis colleagues partnering with CLS on a series of representations concerning public benefits. This particular representation was a special highlight for me, including the new experience of a virtual preliminary injunction hearing during the pandemic.



Leanne Welds

Partner with Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP

While I have had the opportunity to work on a number of pro bono matters over the years, my most memorable was my work to obtain a T nonimmigrant status visa for a labor trafficking victim who we will call "Sylvia." At the age of 13, Sylvia was forced into an arranged marriage and was ultimately sent from her home country to the United States to live with her trafficker husband.

She was subjected to verbal, physical and sexual abuse, forced to work at the [behest] and under the complete control of her husband, and bore two children by her abuser.

Through a referral ... I was connected with the client as part of her initial intake and, with the complete support of the firm, quickly agreed to take on her application for T nonimmigrant status on a pro bono basis. Four years of work later, I was able to deliver the news to Sylvia that her T-visa had been approved and she had legal status in the United States. She told me it was the best call she had ever received.

My time working on this case highlights that our impact in the world should not always be measured by its breadth but also its depth. Obtaining T nonimmigrant status was a life-changing and lifesaving experience for Sylvia and her children, an outcome that would likely not have been achieved without significant time commitment and devotion to building the strongest case for Sylvia's circumstance.



Shirin Afsous

Associate with Greenberg Traurig LLP

Over the last year I represented an Afghan woman living in Virginia who was trapped in an abusive relationship, did not speak English, and had extremely rudimentary education as a child in Afghanistan. Her husband filed for divorce and as part of the relief he requested, he wanted to use the parties' Islamic marital contract to preclude her from receiving alimony and her share of the parties' equitable division of assets. Interpretation of the Islamic marital contract, which was in Farsi, became a key component to the case, and we worked diligently to provide the court with Virginia case law and cultural context to ensure that our client received what she was entitled to pursuant to the Islamic marital contract as well as alimony and equitable distribution of assets.

I became emotionally invested in this case after it was referred to me through my role as president of the D.C. Chapter of the Iranian American Bar Association, because my client was the victim of so many different injustices through no fault of her own. She was the victim of domestic violence, being denied an education, and yearslong manipulation from her spouse to make her think that she had no other options.

I'm proud to say that the judge agreed with our arguments, granting our client custody of their two children, alimony, child support, an equitable distribution of assets, as well as payment of her dowry

under the Islamic marital contract. The icing on the cake was that even though we handled this case pro bono, the judge awarded our client \$7,500 in legal fees because of her husband's failure to provide complete discovery during the litigation process, and his efforts to rely on that information during trial.



Bethany Saul

Associate with Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP

I met Amina during my first month of practice. A few months prior, Amina had fled Nigeria after facing life-threatening violence on account of her sexual orientation, tragically leaving behind her partner and her three young children. I felt so much pressure to make sure Amina trusted me with her case. It felt like my responsibility not just as her pro bono lawyer, but as a fellow young, queer woman, to sit with Amina, oftentimes with tea and a box of tissues, and hear her story. I feared that Amina's identity as a cisgender bisexual woman, married to a cisgender man, would be heavily scrutinized and unfairly adjudicated by an asylum officer, and we had many difficult conversations about how to frame her claims. Throughout the process, Amina insisted on staying true to herself and her story — at times forcing me to question my own biases, and oftentimes, inspiring me to also be authentic and proud of my LGBTQ+ identity in all spaces.

Amina was granted asylum in 2020, and three years later, we received the long-awaited news that her husband and three children had been granted the same. Amina is one of the first of Legal Services NYC clients in the LGBTQ+ asylum program to receive derivative asylum for her family members. It is a true testament to Amina's strength and patience, and to a team of lawyers who held her hand (sometimes literally) throughout this journey.

I started this process as Amina's lawyer. But next week, after four years of remote legal proceedings, travel bans, and COVID delays, I'll be at the JFK arrivals gate with Amina, waiting for her family to arrive in New York as simply (and fondly) "auntie" to her children and a member of an extended queer family that transcends physical borders.

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.