

# Global Good Works



Lawyers spend a lot of time representing clients and billing for their services.

More and more are finding that international pro bono can provide a different kind of reward.

By Steven A. Meyerowitz

**L**awyers perform a lot of pro bono legal work on behalf of local clients. In addition, lawyers help out domestically with groups such as Habitat for Humanity or collect for food pantries. But lawyers also do a lot of volunteer work, including pro bono legal work, internationally.

The range of international pro bono legal services that lawyers provide is quite broad. Ellen Freeman, special counsel in the Pittsburgh office of Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney P.C. who focuses her practice on employment-based immigration, has brought a group of Austrian musicians to Pittsburgh pro bono for the Renaissance & Baroque Society. Freeman, an immigrant herself who came to the United States from the Ukraine in 1993, now is bringing a Chilean tenor here for the Christmas Bach Oratorio, also for free.

Paul J. Breloff, an attorney in the Chicago office of Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw L.L.P., has provided pro bono legal advice to the burgeoning microfinance field. Among other things, he counseled a pro bono client in connection with an \$11.6 million private equity investment that closed overseas with a "strictly virtual" digital exchange of documents and signatures and a press conference in India.

One of the largest legal issues arising from the war in Iraq has been the status of the Guantanamo Bay detainees. Perhaps not surprisingly, lawyers have gotten involved in that on a pro bono basis. Last year, for example, attorneys at Washington-based Dickstein Shapiro L.L.P. spent more than 1,000 hours representing detainees. Partner David L. Engelhardt says that working in connection with the Center for Constitutional Rights, the firm's attorneys filed petitions

for writ of habeas corpus and traveled to Guantanamo Bay at firm expense to meet with their imprisoned clients. Firm representatives also traveled to Yemen to meet with family members and the government in an effort to smooth the way for the repatriation of one of their clients.

#### **Ecuador Orphanage**

Lawyers do not only give legal advice and representation to the poor or indigent. They also volunteer in a myriad of other ways to help those in need.

Susan E. Abitanta, an attorney in the Los Angeles office of The Quisenberry Law Firm, is taking a 10-day trip this summer to an orphanage in Quito, Ecuador. Abitanta and nine other members of the Altadena Community Church, including the pastor, have been planning this trip for a year and will be paying their own way. Over this period, they have collected clothing, supplies and money to take to the orphanage, and they have started learning Spanish (or at least some key phrases). Abitanta says her group actually will stay at the orphanage, sleeping in bunk beds and doing their own cooking. They will spend their time with the children, who have disabilities that essentially have made them unadoptable. They'll be "holding the babies, playing with them, helping them with their physical therapy and assisting the 'tias' — the 'aunts' — who need additional help."

#### **Arms of Love**

Needy children are also the focus of Arms of Love International, a Section 501(c)(3) public charity based in the United States that was founded and incorporated about eight years ago by Robert J. Benson, a partner in Hogan & Hartson's Los Angeles office. The charity has established new children's homes from the ground up "to care for orphaned and abandoned children on a full-time basis." Homes currently housing more than 90 children

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Photo from the Web site of the Harvard Project for Sustainable Development, [www.hcs.harvard.edu/hpsd](http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/hpsd)

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are located in four countries: Nicaragua, the Philippines, Mexico and Senegal. A home in Brazil is about 75 percent completed now, Benson says, and is scheduled to open later this year.

Benson, who estimates that he spends about 600 hours per year on Arms of Love, prefers the term "homes" to "orphanages" because the philosophy of Arms of Love is to "try to simulate a family environment." Children live in a home with a couple who care for them, supported by a paid staff. "Our goal is not just to meet the basic physical needs of the kids, which is what most orphanages do, but to meet their educational needs," says Benson. Toward that end, the children go to private schools and Arms of Love has tutors on staff to work with the children. It also focuses on the "psychological component, seeking to create an environment of love." And, because it is a faith-based organization, it helps children with the "spiritual dimension, too."

Arms of Love has grown exponentially over the years. Benson notes that it now has a governing board based in the United States, a \$300,000 annual budget that is "raised all by donations from businesses, individuals and churches" and nearly 60 full-time staff members around the world.

#### Students for 60,000

Peter White was a social studies teacher in a suburban Long Island school district when he decided to go to law school at night. A poverty law class led White to believe in both community service and "action learning." He went to Nicaragua for the first time in 1990, soon after the Contra War ended, taking nine suitcases filled with supplies and medicine. "I had my eyes opened," White says. "I came back with a new view. I couldn't wait to share and to interest others."

White started a high school club called Students for 60,000, named for the estimated number of homeless people in New York City at the time. In February 1992, White went back to Nicaragua with 12 students from the club. That was the first of what has become two trips annually, each with about 40 students. According to White, there have been more than 30 student trips to date, the club has "adopted" two Nicaraguan communities and "students have raised more than \$1 million for poverty projects in Nicaragua."

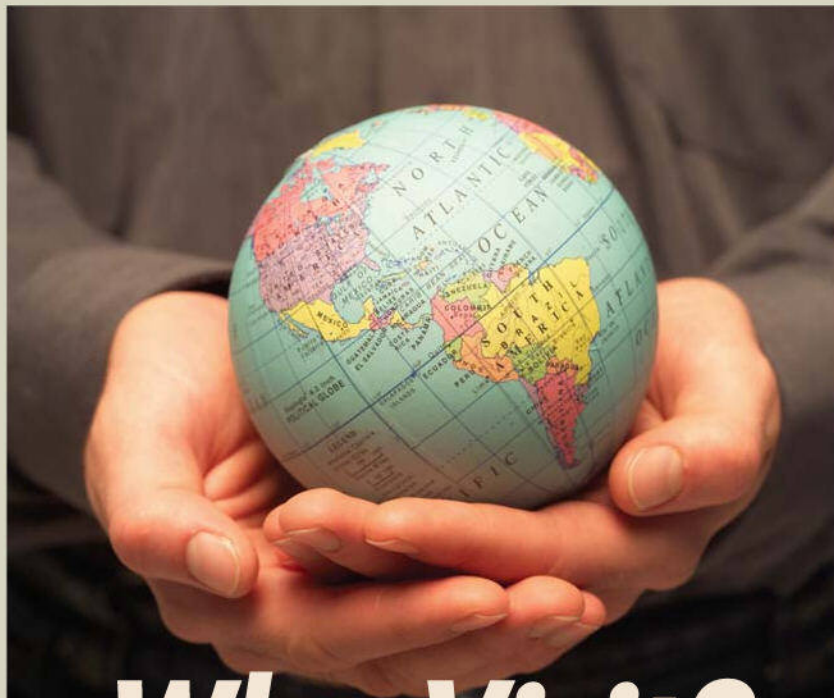
White was the 1999 New York state teacher of the year largely because of his work with Students for 60,000. He believes his legal background has served him well. He says the New York state constitution contains an "affirmative

obligation” to help the needy. Moreover, as an attorney, he is familiar with contracts and torts. “I think about things a little differently because of what I know about negligence law,” White says. “I know about my duty to supervise; I’ve read the case law.” Thus, before all trips, he spends a lot of time preparing students, training chaperones, explaining rules, communicating with liaisons in Nicaragua and meeting with parents. Recently, he even prepared a manual that provides a wealth of information to chaperones, students, parents and administrators about the trip.

#### Why International Service?

Lawyers who work on international pro bono matters often are faced by skeptics who ask why they do not focus on local or national problems. One response, as pointed out by Peter White, is that Students for 60,000 does not just deal with international problems. “The club provides aid, care and support locally, nationally and internationally,” he states. Indeed, he adds that much of the students’ efforts are focused on the needy on Long Island and in New York City, as well as nationally. Susan Abitanta of The Quisenberry Law Firm observes that she and other members of her church in fact “do a lot of things in the community: A homeless food bank is housed in our church, and we fund a homeless shelter.” Abitanta adds that her church is a United Church of Christ “peace and justice” church that believes in international aid and in “trying to make a peaceful world.”

Arms of Love founder Robert Benson says there are other reasons for focusing on international work. “From a relative perspective,” Benson states, “the needs in developing countries are much greater than they are here, the resources are not there and dollars go farther there than here.” Benson points out that the Arms of Love home in the Philippines cares for



# Why Visit?

Does it make sense to spend money to visit an orphanage or a poor village in Nicaragua? Why not just take the money that would be used for travel and donate it for charitable purposes? Robert Benson believes visits are of great importance.

“Mother Teresa used to say, ‘Come and see,’” Benson says. “It is the way I feel.” If people want to know about Arms of Love and what it is doing, they should “come and see.” Benson believes people “have a tendency to get insulated from what life is like in other places of the world,” but “if we get out of our comfort zone, we change — maybe we become

more sensitive to the needs of our own community.” In Benson’s view, the act of actually visiting “changes people’s hearts. You can read an article about children in trouble that can touch you, but if you go to Africa, it touches you in a totally different way. It can have a far-reaching impact.”

Benson acknowledges that some of his biggest donors have never seen any of his projects, though he notes they “are welcome” to. He says that to visit an Arms of Love home “is life changing and, not to be a cliché, it has the potential to be world changing if enough people do it.”

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more than 40 children with a staff of 20 on a budget of only \$7,000 per month. He believes it is important to “take a global view,” and while he does “not say that we shouldn’t be acting locally,” he views children “as equally worthy to be taken care of, no matter where they are.”

#### The First Step

Can a few lawyers or even a lot of lawyers working on seemingly intractable international problems really make a difference? Does it matter helping 90 children in Arms of Love homes or even putting more than \$1 million in aid into Nicaragua over nearly 20 years? Benson certainly believes so. “You have to take a step,” he says. “One step leads to another step, which leads to another step.” He says that if Arms of Love can “permanently change the direction” of 90 or so children’s lives now and those children grow up and have children of their own, there will be a “huge ripple effect.” As he and other lawyers involved in international good works recognize, that first step has to be taken for there to be others. ☺



Steven A. Meyerowitz

*Steven A. Meyerowitz, a lawyer and freelance writer is a regular contributor. He went to Nicaragua with Students for 60,000, an organization mentioned in this article, in May 2002.*

*If you would like to comment on this article for publication in our next issue, please e-mail us at [editor@pabar.org](mailto:editor@pabar.org).*

## 11 Web Sites for Lawyers Interested in International Pro Bono

- [www.altadenaucc.org/web/index.php?&MMN\\_position=1:1](http://www.altadenaucc.org/web/index.php?&MMN_position=1:1) (Altadena Community Church)
- [www.armsoflove.org/](http://www.armsoflove.org/) (Arms of Love)
- [www.sf60k.org/index.html](http://www.sf60k.org/index.html) (Students for 60,000)
- [www.ijm.org](http://www.ijm.org) (International Justice Mission)
- [www.jfci.org](http://www.jfci.org) (Justice for Children International)
- [www.lblfoundation.org](http://www.lblfoundation.org) (LBL Foundation for Children)
- [www.viva.org](http://www.viva.org) (Viva Network)
- [www.hcs.harvard.edu/hpsd/](http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/hpsd/) (Harvard Project for Sustainable Development)
- [www.miraclecorners.org/](http://www.miraclecorners.org/) (Miracle Corners of the World)
- [www.clintonglobalinitiative.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?&pid=895&srcid=-2](http://www.clintonglobalinitiative.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?&pid=895&srcid=-2) (Clinton Global Initiative)
- [www.islp.org/](http://www.islp.org/) (International Senior Lawyers Project)

