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SOUL FOOD

Why pro bono work is like matzo ball soup

Tracey I. Batt/Special to NLJ.com
April 23, 2007



New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts director Tracey Batt

One of my professors at Cardozo once described his family as "Christmas tree Jewish." At first blush, I thought this was a perfect way to describe my family as well. When I was a child, we had the Christmas tree and the menorah in the same room. We hoped that the one would not set fire to the other. My parents worried that the rabbi would come to the house unannounced. Not enough to make us take down the tree, of course, but they worried. "Christmas Tree Jewish." I liked it.

The more I thought about it, however, the more I decided that this was not quite the appropriate nomenclature. My family didn't just celebrate another faith's religious holiday because we didn't want to be the only kids in the neighborhood without a Christmas tree. It was much deeper than that. My family would gather together as often as possible to celebrate any holiday of any religion or any nationality — as long as it involved food. We were not "Christmas tree Jewish"; we were "Christmas *cookie* Jewish." In fact, we still are. A glass of eggnog in one hand, a plate of latkes in the other.

We are enthusiastically passing this wonderful, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-culinary tradition on to the next generation, namely my brother's young daughter and son. And so, despite my more than 20 years of avowed atheism, when my mother recently announced that we were having a family Seder for Easter dinner (following the family Easter egg hunt, of course), I had only one question: Will you be making matzo ball soup?

I love matzo ball soup. It is good for everything that ails you. It warms you inside and out. It can fill you up if the main course looks like it might be a little dry, or it can whet your appetite for more. With the proper amount of garlic, it can even make your cold feel better.

Pro bono work is a lot like matzo ball soup. I know from experience that it sometimes can feel as though law firm life is stealing your soul, bit by bit. For junior associates, clients are often faceless companies with whom the attorney has no direct contact, and day-to-day assignments are small issues representing tiny corners of much bigger pictures that the attorney never gets to see. For more senior attorneys, the problem can be the simple fact that the questions posed are always so complex. No client pays big-firm rates to ask simple questions.

Pro bono work is the matzo ball soup that can nurse you through personal and professional crises like these. Not

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getting enough client contact? Mediate a dispute. Worried that you will never understand the big picture? Be the attorney of record on a pro bono matter from beginning to end. Not foreseeing any opportunities to argue a motion in court? Accept a litigation or asylum matter. Need drafting practice? Help form a non-profit organization. Want to brush up on your negotiation skills? Represent a party in a contract formation. Need a little reassurance regarding your abilities as a lawyer? Accept a telephone consultation in a subject area you know thoroughly or review the terms of an existing agreement to explain rights and responsibilities. Always wanted to practice in a particular area of law but don't get the opportunity in your current position? Accept a matter for an organization that provides that kind of service.

No client will ever thank you as directly or as profusely for your efforts and your expertise as a pro bono client will. The personal and professional satisfaction you receive from helping a real, flesh-and-blood person to resolve a \$500 dispute that means the difference between having and not having a roof over his or her head at the end of the day will rival anything you can get from resolving a \$500 million dispute for a corporate client.

Share your talents and your experience with someone less fortunate who needs your help. Find an organization dedicated to a cause about which you are passionate and volunteer your time and your efforts. Step outside your comfort zone. Challenge yourself. You will feel the warm glow, inside and out, that comes from receiving genuine appreciation from a deserving person whom you have helped. You will feel full with the satisfaction of doing a good deed, and it will revitalize and reenergize you to do more, both in your regular job and on a pro bono basis.

In short, it will be good for everything that ails you. And you will be a better lawyer, and a better person, when you are done.

OK, I fibbed. I actually had two questions: Will you be making matzo ball soup, and will we be having chocolate bunnies for dessert?

Tracey I. Batt, Esq., is the Executive Director of New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts, Inc. Before joining NJVLA, she was the Associate Director and Legal Services Manager of Philadelphia Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts and an associate at Well, Gotshal & Manges LLP in New York, where she practiced copyright and music licensing law for seven years.

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