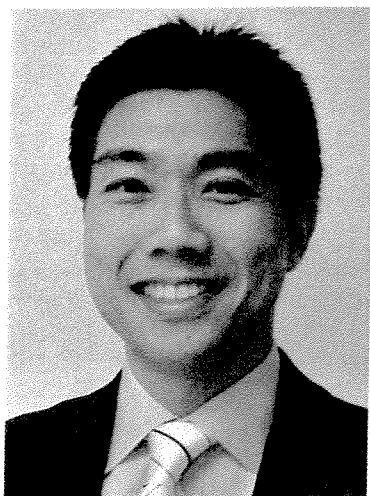


Lawyering and Volunteerism

By Alvin Chan



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It has long been a tongue-in-cheek saying among those in the military: "Don't volunteer" when the drill sergeant asks who's game for a challenge. Luckily for society's needy, members of the civilian legal ranks have never particularly espoused that philosophy. And while most volunteer services are fairly serene endeavors, some lawyers and judges have "seen action" on the volunteer lines every bit as hazardous as those who have signed up for armed services duty.

Case in point: Judge Judith Chirlin, who presides over civil and criminal trials in Los Angeles County Superior Court, has twice found her life on the line in the course of her volunteer activities. Last year, while serving as the sole American Bar Association representative in a delegation to Iraq for the In-

ternational Legal Assistance Consortium (ILAC), Judge Chirlin barely escaped a suicide bombing attack on a United Nations building. The ILAC delegation's primary mission in Iraq was to identify projects for its members that would enable the Iraqi judicial system to become functional once again, as well as to assess the beleaguered country's judicial system in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's rule. There was a great sensitivity by the Iraqi people that foreigners would come, assess the status of the judicial system and then do nothing to effect improvements. The August 19, 2003 attack killed the top U.N. envoy in Iraq at the time, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and 22 others; dozens more were injured. Judge Chirlin left the building barely 90 minutes before the bombing.

Enough to send Judge Chirlin scampering from the perils of overseas volunteering? Not on your (or more aptly, her) life. Even before her close call in Iraq, Judge Chirlin experienced the potential hazards of volunteering in remote locales. In 1997, she underwent emergency heart surgery after collapsing during a volunteer mission in Bulgaria. At the time she was in Eastern Europe to conduct a

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program for the Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative (CEELI), whose fundamental goal is to foster stable judicial systems in former totalitarian regimes of the former Soviet Bloc. Before falling ill in Bulgaria, Judge Chirlin facilitated a program between judges and journalists designed to lead to better public understanding of the rule of law by improving media coverage on the judicial system.

Judge Chirlin views volunteerism as "a great way to give back." It "allows you to meet interesting people who are fun, and helps clear your mind after an extensive period of hard legal work. Providing helpful and constructive volunteer services ensures an important balance for young attorneys." Moreover, Judge Chirlin believes her volunteer work broadened her view of the world and her understanding of other cultures. It has heightened her appreciation for the fact that others do not always view world issues from the same perspective as most Americans.

Other Attorneys Who Volunteer and What They Do

Not all volunteer activities, however, have such a global focus. The typical lawyer/volunteer participates in local organizations and normally does not do so at any great personal risk or sacrifice (other than the time spent away from those precious billable hours). The vast majority of legal volunteers devote themselves to organizations that serve their communities. M.C. Sungaila, a partner in the appellate firm of Horvitz & Levy, LLP, in Encino, enjoys volunteering with local organizations for the arts. She has served on the board of the Opera Pacific, worked with Bravo (a support group for young professionals) and participated in a fundraising committee for the Orange County Performing Arts Center (www.ocpac.org) called "Masquerade Committee for the Arts in OC."

Sungaila's major volunteer focus has been as founder and co-chair of the Women's Leadership Forum (WLF). WLF is a Los Angeles-based nationwide group aimed at preventing and educating teenagers about

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domestic violence. The group serves to inform people about available legal recourse to domestic abuse situations in the hopes of breaking the cycle of domestic violence.

Volunteer opportunities exist for anyone who wishes to help. Attorneys volunteer in a wide variety of areas closely aligned with the law, as in the case of Judge Chirlin, while others choose to volunteer in areas wholly unrelated to the law, as in Sungaila's work with the arts. There is also a middle ground. San Diego area lawyers Ed Brien, a family law practitioner, and Jeff Landes, a senior

associate with the Catalyst Law Group, an intellectual property practice, volunteer as mentors to troubled youths who are on parole through the San Diego chapter of the Volunteers in Parole (VIP) program.

Both Brien and Landes report overwhelmingly positive experiences working with teens and young adults through VIP, a non-profit organization that pairs new parolees

bled youths who typically lacked any such structure in their lives. For the mentees and their families, the program and its volunteers help reassure them that there are resources and people willing to help assist them to rebuild their lives.

The husband-wife team of Joseph and Dianne Lumsdaine has contributed substantially to their community, both through volunteer work with their church, and through non-faith based organizations. Based in Downey, he is a litigation partner with Tredway, Lumsdaine & Doyle, LLP, and she has an estate planning and family law practice.

The couple chaired the building committee for St. Dominic Savio Catholic Church in the nearby community of Bellflower. As a result of their work, the idea for the new church developed from proposal to fund-raising to completion to dedication on October 26, 2002, in just over three years.

The Lumsdaines have been actively involved in many other organizations. Joseph has devoted time to the Arc (formerly the Association of Retarded Citizens; www.thearc.org), Kiwanis Club, City of Downey Environmental Commission, and Habitat for Humanity (www.habitat.org), while Dianne has dedicated her efforts also to Arc, as well as Soroptimist International (www.soroptimist.org), City of Downey Planning Commission, and the Cable TV Citizens Advisory Committee.

For some, volunteerism is an instinctive extension of their personalities and upbringing. Judge Chirlin, a self-described "joiner," naturally gravitated to participating in community activities. She had an extensive record of volunteering prior to her legal career, from poll-watching on election day with her family, to helping the Girl Scouts, to volunteering as an undergraduate with Congressman Ed Reinecke's office in Washington D.C., among other activities.

Her volunteerism continued into her legal and judicial career, including her work with

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from the California Youth Authority with local attorneys. The program functions broadly in two ways: (1) preventing crime by mentoring recent parolees instead of leaving them to manage their lives by themselves; and (2) providing a support system for trou-

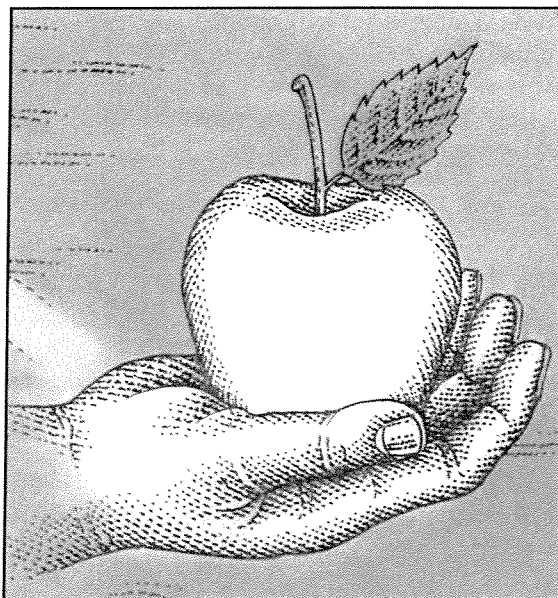
organizations such as the Constitutional Rights Foundation (CRF; www.crf-usa.org), International Legal Assistance Consortium (ILAC; www.ilacinternational.org), California Women Lawyers (CWL), Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative (CEELI; www.abanet.org/ceeli/), American Judicature Society (AJS; www.ajs.org), and the National Jury Trial Innovations Project (NJTIP; www.iadclaw.org/scriptcontent/trialinnov.cf).

Judge Chirlin has worked with high school and junior high school students in educational mock trial programs through CRF. For three years (most of them before she took the bench), she served as the "Judicial Appointment Chair" with the CWL, through a program she created in the hopes of increasing the number of women appointed to the bench in California. As the former chair of the AJS board, she has sought to bridge the gap between the legal profession and the average citizen. AJS is not limited to attorneys. Its membership consists of judges, lawyers and other public-spirited citizens. Individuals who are dedicated to improving the way the court system functions, former jurists, and people from all walks of life are encouraged to participate and provide comprehensive feedback regarding their experiences.

— Effects of Volunteerism — and Why We Should

Lawyers who volunteer say volunteerism benefits everyone involved, not only the recipients. Volunteers find their work rewarding because it provides a fresh perspective on the community in which they live. A deeper understanding of people and the community, they say, makes for better lawyers and better people.

The volunteer efforts of Brien and Landes with their VIP mentees, for example, provides a unique insight into a world where children are raised in an environment fraught with parental and family problems. Their



involvement in VIP has enabled them to better appreciate issues and problems outside of those that affect their immediate lives as attorneys, and helps put the demands of their practices in perspective.

Joseph Lumsdaine believes that as attorneys we have certain talents, which he is determined to put to use while he has the opportunity. Volunteerism provides the perfect vehicle for leading a balanced life and trying to make the world a better place. Dianne Lumsdaine said her volunteer work is emotionally rewarding. "Reaching out into the community is a very spiritually uplifting use of time. One doesn't do it for the thanks, but it really enriches your life," she said.

However, volunteerism is not necessarily purely altruistic. There can be tangible benefits for the volunteers, too. Volunteering connects lawyers to the community network and refines our interpersonal skills, both of which may in turn help develop one's legal practice. And the more the public understands and feels a connection with lawyers, the more the legal profession benefits. A genuine donation of time to the service of one's community is an ideal opportunity to bridge differences of

status, wealth, education and race. We should also volunteer because as attorneys we have a unique power to effect positive social change and the opportunity to lead by example.

An Imbalance of Work and Volunteerism

Time is precious and finite. How we spend any free time in our lives is an extremely important issue. In an age of instant gratification, people gravitate toward activities such as surfing the web, watching television, playing video games, and the like. An important effect of this trend is that it increasingly separates people from each other. Although the web does offer a form of interpersonal interaction via online communities, for example, we still remain shielded from true interaction with real live people. Volunteerism would alleviate some of these problems.

How we choose to spend our free time is a crucial factor in how well we juggle a successful career with the desire to help others in need. Volunteerism can bring people back together by counter-balancing this slide toward a world where we are all merely account numbers or user names to each other. By dedicating part of our lives to the service of others, we strengthen the bonds of community and set an example for others.

However, those who volunteer underscore that it should not be done at the expense of a lawyer's career or personal life. "A lawyer with a balanced life is a better lawyer and a better human being." (Dennis W. Archer, *A New Year's Resolution: Consider What You Can Do This Year to Improve the Justice System*, 90 A.B.A. J. 8; 2004)

Volunteerism – Solutions & Suggestions

An abundance of free time is a luxury that most attorneys do not have. The demands on us can be great and periodically extremely

intense. If time is the limiting factor for one's hesitation to volunteer, the best advice is to maintain a realistic perspective and not over-commit oneself. Time management is crucial in the practice of law and it is a skill lawyers can help hone when incorporating volunteerism into their lives and careers.

It is important to note that volunteer commitments do not have to be large projects. For example, instead of serving as chairman of the board for an organization, one might participate on the board instead. By starting small, lawyers can gently ease themselves into volunteer work without jeopardizing the quality of their work, their training or their career path. Also, starting slowly helps ensure that the attorney is able to meet commitments to clients. Another factor of successful volunteerism is to play to strengths and skill sets. Select an appropriate volunteer activity that fits your workload and abilities.

Finally, keep an open mind. Opportunities come from the most unexpected of circumstances. Consider Brien, who in addition to volunteering as a mentor through VIP also does work for the San Diego Center for the Blind (SDCB; www.sdcdb.org). One day in 1978, a friend who was vision-impaired and on the SDCB board asked Brien if he would replace him so that he could return to school. Brien obliged and has remained active with the SDCB since. His reward is to see the adults with whom he works regain their self-sufficiency, confidence and basic daily living skills. Brien believes that "You're a better person as a result of your volunteerism, and as a result, you're a better attorney."

Attorneys donate their time and efforts in many non-legal areas. Some begin volunteering early in their lives, and others later, but the common denominator is initiative and a desire to better the lives of others. To paraphrase Albert Schweitzer, "You will not find true happiness until you learn how to give."