

CHICAGO LAWYER

Small things, great love: Mother Teresa has a surprising lesson for lawyers

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By Meg Benson

Meg Benson has worked for Chicago Volunteer Legal Services, the oldest pro bono organization in the country, for more than 30 years. As executive director, she coordinates the agency's bench, bar and law firm relations and directs its program management and funding. A family law litigator, she still handles minor guardianship and custody cases.

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"Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." — Mother Teresa.

Consider putting Mother Teresa's words into a legal context: Not all attorneys will handle big cases, but we can handle small cases with great love.

Big cases are, well, big — in scope, in national interest and in impact. Organizations like the ACLU, aided by pro bono attorneys at large law firms, file significant cases challenging government actions, laws or decisions. Scores, maybe hundreds of attorneys from around the country, work on these cases. Some of the attorneys reading this column may be among that group. However, most of us are not.

The fact is that relatively few attorneys handle these cases of national importance. Most of us work for or represent a single entity or a variety of individuals or businesses, doing everyday lawyer work.

Regardless, no matter where or with whom you work, you can make a difference in the world by doing small pro bono work with great love.

Immigration is an issue of national interest and significance, thanks, in large part to executive orders, decisions and new policies being issued by the current administration. While the ACLU and other organizations are challenging these changes on the national stage, Chicago attorneys can help locally by representing individual immigrants or asylum-seekers.

Immigrants seeking legal status in the United States are not entitled to court-appointed counsel and, as you can imagine, are rarely able to competently represent themselves through the long, complicated and ever-shifting procedures and laws. According to a 2016 American Immigration Council study, only 37 percent of all immigrants and 14 percent of detained immigrants go to court with attorneys. Pro bono attorneys greatly improve the odds of success in these cases.

And consider immigrant children detained in the Chicago area. The National Immigrant Justice Center's Children's Protection Project invites attorneys to visit children's detention facilities to interview them, assess their cases and deliver Know Your Rights presentations that provide an overview of the immigration court process.

These children cry out for pro bono legal assistance. Sometimes, something as simple as filing and handling a circuit court petition to make an abused or abandoned immigrant child eligible for special immigrant juvenile status will put that child on the road to obtaining legal status.

Small cases handled with love by pro bono attorneys can change the world for adult and child immigrants.

Immigrants are not the only people whose worlds can be changed by small pro bono cases. For instance, housing is a basic human need and right and people with disabilities often depend on public housing subsidies to live in safe, affordable places. When something goes awry, and the subsidy is terminated, a pro bono attorney advocating for a tenant, can work magic.

Physically and mentally disabled, Anne had lived in subsidized housing for more than a decade, until she got into a fight with a family member and her voucher was terminated. With eviction looming, Anne was referred to a treatment center for her mental illness where she got the right medication and therapy. She tried to get her voucher back, but she couldn't articulate her defense or her need.

Luckily for Anne, a pair of pro bono attorneys came to her aid, passionately articulating Anne's diagnosis and the changes she had made. Thanks to their clear communications, Anne is back, safe and sound in her subsidized apartment.

A small thing done with great love changed Anne's world and, in a way, changed ours a little bit as well. Consider how much of the world we could change if all of us did a few small things with great love every year.

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