PRO BONO WORK: THE GIFT YOU GIVE TO YOURSELF

— By Bonnie Stein, Esquire

At this time of year, with the Holidays approaching, we all start to think about gift giving. It is the time of year that makes me smile as I remember what I have learned is the best gift – giving and sharing my time with others through pro bono service, civic activities and BCBA-sponsored activities.

I arrived in Bucks County in 1988 as a wife, a mother of teenagers, and a new lawyer, with one year of legal experience as a Texas lawyer. I was starting a legal position at Curtin & Heefner as our family came "home" to Pennsylvania. Fortunately for me, Mr. Heefner encouraged both civic and pro bono activities. Over the past thirty years I have learned and experienced the blessings of being able to give time to others with the support and encouragement of Curtin & Heefner.

Years ago, letters were sent by the Bucks County President Judge to every BCBA member. Those letters enclosed forms requesting each attorney to sign up for Bucks County Legal Aid pro bono service. After Bucks County and three other local counties merged their Legal Aid programs into Southeastern Legal Aid, the sign-up letters were sent to attorneys directly from Legal Aid. Signed forms from Firm attorneys volunteering to provide assistance to Legal Aid are then returned by the Firm.

For many years Curtin & Heefner attorneys have worked and assisted Legal Aid clients. Stories shared by attorneys after involvement in pro bono matters are frequently both sad and heartwarming. The drive back to the office after a volunteer event passes quickly with a sense of being thankful for being able to help someone in need. Curtin & Heefner attorneys have gone above and beyond on several occasions, donating personal time and money to help out Legal Aid clients that they represented.

Being the Pro Bono Coordinator at Curtin & Heefner (for too many years to count!) has been an eye-opening experience. Attorneys continually return from the Courthouse after Wednesday Protection from Abuse hearings with a new appreciation for the needs of both victims and those wrongly accused. Stories are often shared with smiles for a good outcome or with tears for the victims of abuse.

Working closely over the years with Randi Reefner, attorney Meg Groff, and the entire incredible Legal Aid staff under the direction of Liz Fritsch was a pleasure. Connecting Legal Aid clients with Curtin & Heefner attorneys to provide legal representation in emergency PFAs, license suspensions and evictions has been rewarding for all involved.

Following the steps of Curtin & Heefner attorneys John Donaghy and Dean Arthur, I was a member of the Legal Aid Board and served several years as Board President. The Board supported the idea of the late Tom Mellon who, in typical "Tom style," worked tirelessly to create a relatively straightforward process where fees paid to a lawyer serving as a Bucks County Arbitrator could be donated to Legal Aid. That program is still in existence today.

Merriam-Webster defines pro bono in part as "for the public good … the motivation behind pro bono work is to benefit society." While pro bono efforts include volunteering for Legal Aid, the BCBA provides many other opportunities. You will laugh on the drive home after reading a book about the Constitution to grade school students, trying to explain some constitutional processes while listening to their endearing innocence. You will smile realizing you made an impact when the parents of a high school student who shadowed you for a day invite you to dinner. Your heart will burst with pride when you learn that several students you coached in Mock Trial graduated from law school.

Although timing may vary, at some point during the year, every attorney who belongs to the Bucks County Bar Association will receive the Legal Aid form letter asking for assistance. Know that you can feel like a million bucks by volunteering! There are so many activities and ways that we can each give the gift of our time. And the best gift? It is the gift you give to yourself – pride, smiles, and joy in your heart.