

“To Serve or Not To Serve: Is That Really The Question?”

Every year as we welcome a new class of lawyers to the profession, I think back to my own induction. More importantly I am moved to reflect on a portion of the Lawyer’s Creed we swore to uphold:

“To The Public and our System of Justice, I offer SERVICE. I shall devote some of my time and skills to community, governmental and other activities that promote the common good. I shall strive to improve the law and our legal system and to make the law and our legal system available to all.”

The hustle and bustle of law practice doesn’t always lend itself to many opportunities to serve, whether in the form of pro bono services or community philanthropic initiatives. Gone are the days in which lawyers were general practitioners. This is the age of “specialty.” As a result, our practices and clientele often lack diversity. Consequently, we no longer receive the economic and social education which went hand in hand with a general practice. Am I advocating turning back the clock to general practice days? No. Quite frankly, the onset of the specialty age has been and will remain to be beneficial. However, the aforementioned economic and social education remains necessary to our growth as lawyers. Fortunately, community legal service is an adequate vehicle for such an endeavor.

Oftentimes, many of us are guilted into participating in the local volunteer lawyer program or community service project. After all, how would it look if we, who have so much, said no to those who have less? The missing element in the “sales pitch”; however, is the benefit beyond appealing to our moral compass. As lawyers we sometimes forget what it means to be an advocate and counselor. For professionals who deal with people on a regular basis, we often lose sight of the most integral part of our practice...humanity. The fact is service makes us better lawyers. As a litigator, it has become clear to me in my young career that the key to success oftentimes lies in understanding people. Service brings us face to face with the most intimate human experiences. Exposure to these experiences gives us greater insight into the complexities of why people make decisions which can be invaluable in preparing for depositions, settlement negotiations, and trial.

Additionally, community legal service forces us to communicate with a diverse range of clients, e.g., low income clients, community groups, service providers, etc. These diverse perspectives are beneficial in tasks such as jury trial theme selection, multi-party disputes, legislation, or collaborative problem solving, just to name a few.

Beyond the “business case” for community legal service, the fact remains volunteerism, philanthropy, and community service are plainly stated...the right things to do. Nothing could be more evident in these lean economic times. We need look no further than outside our windows to see members of our community struggling to get by. No one can deny that our legal system is dropping the ball with regard to providing affordable, predictable services to our community. This lack of access touches not only the poor, but small businesses and middle class families as well. Fortunately, our legal and business communities have a history of resilience. As lawyers we are leaders in our community. Sometimes by choice, sometimes by default. As leaders, it is

our responsibility to actively participate in our respective communities. Community legal service will be integral in revitalizing and gaining back the community's trust in our profession. What impacts some of us, ultimately will reach to the rest of us. As the saying goes "No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent." It might serve us (pun intended) well to remember this.

Good luck and be safe out there.