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# Volunteerism and Transition

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# Volunteerism and Transition

By John D. Feerick and Jessica Thaler

**JOHN D. FEERICK**, the Founder and Director of the Feerick Center for Social Justice and Dispute Resolution, was the Dean of Fordham Law School from 1982–2002. He has held the Sidney C. Norris Chair of Law in Public Service since 2004 and was the Leonard F. Manning Professor of Law from 2002–2004. John began his career at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom; he spent 21 years (1961–1982) there, developing and heading up its labor department.

**JESSICA THALER** is the Chief Legal Officer of My Sisters' Place, a not-for-profit organization working to end violence in intimate relationships and combat the effects of domestic violence and human trafficking on victims throughout Westchester County. Having had a rich experience as a corporate-transactional generalist, she now provides agency counsel and oversees the organization's Center for Legal Services, which affords victims greater access to legal protections and remedies crucial to their survival and safety, engages in legislative advocacy and provides legal education regarding the laws and regulations applicable to these victims. She is a graduate of UCLA, *cum laude* (1995), and Fordham University School of Law School (1999).

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American society places a high value on community service and civic engagement. In 2010, 62.7 million volunteers accounted for 8.1 billion hours of community service, providing services worth an estimated value of \$173 billion.<sup>1</sup> It is no different for lawyers. For many attorneys, a life in the law without experiencing and participating in some aspect of public service means they will miss out on the full potential of life. There are so many opportunities at hand – to represent people, to work in not-for-profit and government offices, to advance the state of the law, to teach and educate the next generation – that volunteering can and should be a part of every lawyer's professional identity.

Volunteering and “having a cause” are in vogue, but volunteering is a much more powerful experience. The volunteer gains much more than merely a throwaway line for a resume or an addition to the bottom of a LinkedIn page.



When we spoke with Justice Sandra Day O'Connor in 2012 we asked her what advice she would offer lawyers in transition, especially those who wanted to continue to have meaning and purpose in life. Justice O'Connor responded: "I like the nonprofit segment of society. I've been involved as a volunteer for most of my life with various community organizations that are trying so hard to provide services to people in a whole variety of ways. All of them welcome help from lawyers. You can think in your own community how many of these organizations there are."<sup>2</sup>

### Volunteering Is an Education

Although volunteering is rarely seen as such, it is an extremely powerful tool for lawyers in transition. First, volunteering allows lawyers to develop skills in new areas. Volunteering provides an opportunity to develop, reconnect with and maintain the more general lawyering skills that the volunteer's specific practice area might not call for. By working with nonprofits that often serve under-resourced populations while dealing with limited resources themselves, a lawyer has the chance to assume a great deal of responsibility very early on, often developing a new skill set in a previously unfamiliar area of law.

Volunteering also allows attorneys who are later in their careers to maintain skill sets and pass on the benefit of their experiences and knowledge to the next generation. Because nonprofits and community service organizations often have limited resources – especially compared to the tremendous needs that they serve – these organizations actively welcome volunteers and encourage them to take on substantive work early on. Not only will this help develop real skills for use in a variety of real-life situations, it will also promote the confidence that comes from project management and prioritizing work and interacting with clients with immediate needs.

The attorneys that work for and with nonprofits develop expertise both in an area of law and in the nuances associated with representing the specific type of client that nonprofit serves. The attorney volunteering with such agencies will gain an increased awareness and sensitivity to the needs of such clients while further expanding the attorney's repertoire and skill set. This expanded knowledge set thus benefits both this underserved community and the attorney's regular clients.

### Volunteering Is a Networking Opportunity

Additionally, volunteering is a unique opportunity to build relationships with the community one is serving; it is an experience that allows transitioning lawyers to speak on new topics with the authority and maturity that come with contextualized practice. And it is a practical career advancement tool. Volunteering sends future employers the message that a lawyer is genuinely interested in and committed to the given practice area. It also exposes transitioning lawyers to other established and

practicing lawyers in the practice area. This is an unparalleled chance to build the connections that will help a lawyer to serve the clients they are volunteering for and create the professional network that may lead to mentorship or even a job. Through their volunteer work, attorneys seeking employment will be able to demonstrate their capabilities, whether direct client-related skills like contract negotiation, trial experience, or research and drafting, or professional skills such as management, leadership, resourcefulness, work ethic and versatility.

Volunteering can also be a tool for transitioning lawyers to develop relationships with clients as well as with established practitioners in the field. By working directly with clients, lawyers can gain a sense of the issues that matter and the language and approach that is most effective within a given practice area. This experience will allow lawyers to speak with credibility and authority on the issues with a level of confidence stemming from their time "on the ground."

**Volunteering is a unique opportunity to build relationships with the community one is serving.**

Some people volunteer solely for the purpose of furthering their career and do so begrudgingly and incompletely. However, generally, those in senior or leadership volunteer roles are involved because they want to help others within the area and enhance the experience of those serviced by, and the reputation and perception of, the profession. These leaders generally serve in multiple roles, and many are willing to speak with people about career direction, collaborate with them on business development and act as mentors.

### Volunteering Is a Resume Builder

Though enthusiasm, engagement, intellectual strength and curiosity are often among the most valuable qualities a professional breaking into a new field can possess, employers are often hesitant to take the risk of investing training time and resources in hiring a lawyer with an undemonstrated interest. The worry is that the prospective hire is exaggerating his or her commitment to the field in order to get a job, or that the lawyer's present skills will not translate successfully to the new practice area. Volunteer work can help allay both the perception and the substance of the fear itself. Employers will see that a lawyer's interest is not just "talk," because the lawyer will have a track record and sample work product to refer to in illustrating success in the field.

For attorneys who have recently received their law degrees and are seeking experience, and, increasingly,

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## On a Personal Note...

"One of my most meaningful commitments included working on the committees of the New York City Bar such as the State and Federal Legislation Committee and, most especially as I look backwards, its first lawyer's in transition committee, charged with helping members of our professional at a time of great difficulty in the 1980s. The former committee allowed me to take an active role in shaping the dialogue surrounding developing laws that would affect not only lawyers, but society at large. The latter committee, a creation of several of us, allowed me to work with a wonderful group of colleagues, all invested in trying to help sisters and brothers at the bar. Maddy Stoller chaired that effort and Ken Standard, later to be president of the state bar, became my friends, which is another benefit of such bar work. Strangers, it might be said, become your friends for your professional life.

"As a lawyer for 52 years, I thank those who encouraged me to become engaged in the life of the organized bar, and I will never fail to appreciate the opportunities that came my way to handle a few cases pro bono and learn how much they can reach your inner core. Indeed, one remains my most treasured memory as a lawyer. It involved a young minority who was denied admission to the police department

but through litigation had that result changed. Sometime later he tried to save the life of someone who fell on the subway tracks. He went on to have a distinguished 24-year career with the NYC Police Department, leaving as a detective first grade, and was followed by his son, Michael, who rendered important service at the World Trade Center site on 9/11/2001."

**—John D. Feerick**

*John has been a dedicated public servant throughout his career. Most recently, he has served as a member of the three-person Special Master Panel in the McCain homeless family rights litigation (2003–2005); was appointed to a three-member Referee Panel in Campaign for Fiscal Equity v. State of New York (concerning education equity; 2003); and was the Chair of the Commission to Promote Public Confidence in Judicial Elections (2003). From April 2007 to February 2009, John served as Chair of the New York State Commission on Public Integrity. Previously, John was the President of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York (1992–1994); Chair of the New York State Commission on Government Integrity (1987–1990); and President of the Citizens Union Foundation (1987–1999).*

"My volunteerism has assisted me personally and professionally in navigating the ups-and-downs of my career, the happy and sad moments of intimate relationships and the path of emotional growth and development. Most significant was my participation on the Membership Committee for the New York State Bar Association, which led to my chairing the Committee on Lawyers in Transition, as well as my service on, and ultimately chairing of, an alumni committee for Fordham Law School. Volunteering introduced me to many of my current mentors, confidants and friends. Those relationships, and the lessons learned through working with fellow committee members, panelists and other experts, provided me access to varied and informed opinions and a sooner exposure to potential opportunities.

"My volunteer experience also provided me with the skills to use the transition tools that allowed me to reassess my career goals and shift the direction and focus of my career

with confidence and certainty. I have become one of the lucky ones. I am able to spend my entire work day applying the skills I have acquired, experience I have gained and knowledge I have obtained to public service. This opportunity, and the satisfaction, the meaningful professional relationships and the continued and expanded learning opportunities presented by it, grew directly out of my former and continuing volunteerism."

**—Jessica Thaler**

*Jessica is also a member of the New York State Bar Association and acts as the Committee Chair for its Committee on Lawyers in Transition and is Co-Chair of Membership for its Entertainment, Art and Sports Law Section. She is a member of the Westchester County Bar Association. Jessica is heavily involved in the alumni associations for both universities.*



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for those who have had long and storied careers and are seeking to “give back,” there are fellowship opportunities which permit attorneys to serve the underserved communities through the nonprofits with which they partner while receiving some monetary compensation for their efforts. For the more junior lawyer, such fellowships provide a stipend, substantive experience, training by skilled practitioners and a consistent schedule and work environment, developing their professionalism, honing a proactive sensibility and giving actual legal training. This enhances the lawyer’s chances with prospective employers. For the senior lawyer, such an opportunity allows the lawyer to prolong his or her professional service to clients, teach the next generation of lawyers and benefit from continued structure, collaborative environment and camaraderie, which are important for emotional and mental well-being.

Through volunteer efforts, transitioning attorneys have substantive and tangible experiences and acquire skills to enumerate on their resume, in cover letters and during interviews. Employers will consider those proficiencies in their evaluation of the transitional candidate and see the candidate’s determination and desire to gain and maintain legal knowledge and ability.

### Volunteering Gives a Sense of Perspective

Finally, volunteering is an unparalleled opportunity for social and personal growth. Good work done for

the primary purpose of assisting others will benefit the “do-gooder” by providing something to feel good about, a distraction from life’s day-to-day chaos, information about the cause for which a person is volunteering, the ability to utilize that information for personal benefit or the benefit of another, the experience needed to see subtle nuances in situations and an understanding of how individual circumstances shape reactions and perceptions. The opportunity afforded volunteers can also come from the creation or extension of a new network, personal or professional, of others with similar interests, issues or life experiences.

Even when one is no longer a “lawyer in transition,” volunteer work can, and should, play an important role in one’s professional and personal work ethic. The late Mary Daly, a former Dean of St. John’s University School of Law, described a law degree as performing an “access function . . . enabling bright, energetic members of the working class to transcend economic and social obstacles” to achieve mobility in American society. Even beyond this threshold access function is the understanding of being part of a larger scheme. Service in the organized bar has been a constant in our lives and has allowed each of us to develop personal values and interests and participate in important subjects of the time. ■

1. See Corporation for National and Community Service, <http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/national>.

2. John D. Feerick et al., *A Conversation with Justice Sandra Day O’Connor and Judge Judith S. Kaye*, 81 *Fordham L. Rev.* 1149, 1160–61 (2012).

## TRANSITIONS

**Amy Gewirtz** is the Director of the New Directions for Attorneys program at Pace Law School, which provides practical skills and career counseling to lawyers seeking to return to the legal profession or an alternative legal career. Amy began her career in the private sector, working as an entertainment lawyer in the theater industry. “My goal before, during, and after law school was to be an entertainment lawyer. When I graduated from law school, I was fortunate to work with an entertainment lawyer who represented set, costume, and lighting designers on and off-Broadway, as well as producers of Broadway-bound plays. In connection with those clients, I did a lot of contract negotiation and some securities law work as part of the process of financing these plays.”

Amy then joined the Motion Picture Association of America as an anti-piracy attorney. In this role, she worked with the

attorneys of MPAA-member studios to prevent piracy of their films. “We hired counsel all over the world to assist the MPAA with this goal, as well as to assist with monitoring and, in some cases, creating intellectual property legislation.” Amy’s transition from the entertainment industry began while she was on maternity leave, and she started thinking about working in academia. “I was fortunate enough to be offered a three-month position with the Career Office of my law school. This temporary position turned into a year-long position in that office and then into a nine-year position with the Admissions Office. One of the many lessons I learned from this experience is how important it is to maintain ties with people, both personally and professionally, including the career office of your alma mater.”

– Jocelyn Cibinkas

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