

Preparing for Transition Through Volunteerism

by Sandra Kroll



There is no down side to volunteerism, and attorneys—because of their education, training and broad skill set—are uniquely suited to help others. Every lawyer knows this, but because an attorney’s income is directly tied to billable hours, work can be all-consuming. Finding time to pursue volunteer opportunities can broaden the professional and personal life of every attorney, and can be particularly helpful for those transitioning into, out of, or within legal practice.

Change is a Given

In this day and age, everyone is in transition. While traditional notions of career transition focus on the unemployed, today even gainfully employed people should view themselves as in transition. This includes those who are very happy where they are. Gone are the days of career-spanning job security. Today, recessions happen, big clients go bankrupt, partners disagree and firms break up. Downsizing is a reality. Getting out there, giving of yourself, volunteering, and contributing, all while establishing and maintaining relationships, are things you can and should do to prepare for the future. So even if you are happy where you are—be a volunteer. Do it earnestly and be genuine. It’s a win-win situation.

Volunteering allows you to choose your spotlight and pursue a passion. It allows you to be strategic in a way that is dif-

ferent from the traditional job search. Organizations that thrive on volunteers will be open to your new ideas and contributions in a way that a traditional employer may not be. In this way, you can choose the people you want exposure to. This is especially true for those in a traditional form of transition—the unemployed or the unhappily employed.

Getting where you want to be likely requires exposure to new groups of people. It very often also requires new knowledge and skill sets. Therefore, target volunteer activities that will allow you access to new people and new situations, where you can exercise your current abilities and acquire the skills and knowledge relevant to your career goals.

Volunteering is a way to increase your social and human capital. A volunteer activity will enhance your social capital by providing varied professional contacts, a durable network, employment leads and positive social relationships.¹ Simultaneously, volunteering adds to your human capital by increasing skills, leadership opportunities, and work experience.² A government study shows that this is a winning combination. The Corporation for National and Community Service compiled a report that tracked the relationship between volunteering and employment for a group of 70,535 respondents over a 10-year period.³ The data shows that active volunteers were 27 percent more likely to get a job than non-volunteers.⁴ The study results are stable across gender, race, ethnicity, age, location and unemployment rate.⁵

So how do you get out there and begin?

Self-Assessment and Life Experience Lead the Way

Many New Jersey lawyers are an inspiration. Melissa Gertz, executive director of the Community Justice Center, is one of them. On July 24, 2004, she was the victim of a near-fatal auto accident. She suffered severe head injuries and faced countless surgeries and years of recovery. Her body was crushed but her spirit was not. She emerged with a firsthand understanding of complications resulting from traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

As a result of the accident, Gertz shared conditions common to many returning veterans. She realized these disabled veterans had unique legal needs, and there were few resources available to help them. Drawing on her legal expertise and lifelong concern for the public interest, she founded the Community Justice Center (CJC). The center opened in March 2009 in Trenton, and represents low-income disabled veterans before both the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Social Security Administration. The CJC has a staff of three attorneys who focus on the needs of low-income disabled veterans (many of whom are homeless) who cannot navigate complex social and legal systems.

Gertz already had a long history of public interest work, but it was a profound life experience that drew her to her current pursuits. She states that she never really thinks about why she does what she does, but that it is simply her calling to improve the lives of others by giving of herself and devoting her skills and talents for a greater purpose.⁶

Christina Vassiliou Harvey, an avid volunteer and an attorney with Lomurro, Davison, Eastman & Munoz, P.A., advises that the journey of Melissa Gertz is illus-

trative. She says that it is often a person's own life experiences that cause him or her to be drawn to a particular cause or organization. While in her first year at Rutgers Law School-Newark, Harvey saw the World Trade Center fall and became involved in relief efforts held at Rutgers in the days following Sept. 11, 2001. The events revealed to her that many first responders who place their own lives in danger when helping others in a crisis often lack the proper legal advice and documents to plan for the worst.⁷ Wills for Heroes provides essential estate-planning documents free of charge to our nation's first responders, including wills, living wills, and powers of attorney.⁸ Harvey was the New Jersey coordinator of the Wills for Heroes Foundation from 2009–2013, and she remains a volunteer with that organization. In this way, Harvey chose to align herself with a group that shares her concerns.

Heed Your Calling

Just get out there and do it is the advice from Desha L. Jackson, of the Desha L. Jackson Law Group. She believes everyone has pursuits that really speak to them. It is simply a matter of heeding that calling and making things happen.

About five years ago, Jackson started thinking about taking her practice in a new direction. She was always interested in the arts, and had always enjoyed being around creative people. Thinking there was no reason why her professional activities should not parallel her passion for the arts, she founded her own sports and entertainment consulting service. This allowed her to connect and do business with many who shared her creative motivations.

When someone asked Jackson if she thought Jersey City could be host to a weeklong fashion event, Jersey City Fashion Week (JCFW) was born. Soon after, she founded the DLJ Give to Live Community Foundation.⁹ Give to Live

raises funds and promotes awareness for charitable causes through fashion, entertainment and sports-related events.¹⁰ JCFW celebrates fashion and entertainment, highlights businesses in Jersey City, and creates opportunities to give back to the community through charitable fundraising.¹¹

Give to Live has been a vehicle for Jackson to take on a leadership role in the entertainment world, while at the same time benefiting others in the community.¹² JCFW and Give to Live have donated over \$5,000 to local charities over the past three years, while simultaneously creating countless opportunities for young artists and entertainers to succeed.¹³

Creating Positive Relationships

Since strong, lasting relationships can be formed through volunteerism, partnering with people who share your concerns is important. According to Harvey, positive relationships are produced through continuous, quality activities. Sharing the goals of an organization ensures that your contributions will be genuine and ongoing. In order to build a strong relationship, don't just go to one event or activity; continuously give of yourself. Harvey suggests being genuine first; the personal and professional relationships will follow.¹⁴

Volunteering with community groups provides unique opportunities to meet people from many different backgrounds. Harvey explains that working with various community groups, including serving on the board of directors for the Community Justice Center, has broadened her sphere of exposure to include many different people she would not have met otherwise.¹⁵

Jackson agrees that community involvement has relationship-building benefits. Through Give to Live and producing JCFW, she has worked with a range of people, from government officials and leaders of nonprofits and busi-

nesses to photographers, DJs, models, and stage managers. She explains that every connection is a valuable opportunity to establish a positive relationship. Like-minded individuals have recognized her passion for helping others, and she can call upon this network for help with charitable and professional endeavors.¹⁶

Harvey and Jackson value these relationships because of their devotion to community, but the benefits to business development cannot be overlooked. Harvey estimates that 90 percent of her clients result from this expanded network. Producing cultural and entertainment-themed charitable activities has had a positive impact on Jackson's practice as well.¹⁷ She states that using new relationships to help others realize their dreams is a win-win for everyone.¹⁸

Contribute Your Talents and Build New Skills

In addition to community groups, professional associations are an excellent place to contribute your talents through volunteering. Linda Sikora has done this many times, and explains that it is a great way to get the most out of professional memberships.

When Sikora was pursuing an in-house position in the pharmaceutical industry, she joined the New Jersey chapter of a pharmaceutical industry and networking group. The group welcomed an attorney who had pharmaceutical regulatory experience, and eventually asked her to serve on its board of trustees.

Sikora advises that attorneys in such groups should recognize they have unique and specialized talents to contribute, and should seek opportunities to exercise those talents. As a lawyer in a non-legal professional association, you may find yourself in the minority. Sikora explains that this is an opportunity to contribute your unique skills and experience. She eventually advised the group

on contracts, bylaws, trademark usage, and worked to obtain their 501(c)(6) tax-exempt status. She also comments that there is a hidden advantage for lawyers in transition who volunteer with professional groups: Fees for group events can sometimes be financially prohibitive, but if you volunteer to organize events or contribute at the event site you can often attend for free, or at a significantly reduced rate.

Sikora obtained a staff attorney position with Patton Boggs (now Squire Patton Boggs) through a group event. From personal experience, she explains that professional groups are most beneficial if you make the most of the opportunities they offer.¹⁹

Pro Bono Service

The subject of lawyers and volunteerism would not be complete without a discussion of *pro bono* service. While at Patton Boggs, Sikora was encouraged to complete *pro bono* service and was introduced to Volunteer Lawyers for Justice (VLJ). She has been a volunteer attorney with their Newark Legal Advice and Resource Clinic for Consumers since 2011. When she began with VLJ, she had 12 years of large-scale environmental claims experience but no experience with consumer issues. This lack of experience, she explains, was not a barrier to volunteering because VLJ provided initial and continuing training on the subject, which, together with her general legal background, was sufficient to accomplish the clinic's goals. *Pro bono* service provided Sikora with an opportunity for direct client contact and communication, to develop knowledge in a new area of law, and to use legal skills in a different way than was required when handling large-scale environmental claims.²⁰

Karen Sacks, the founding executive director of VLJ, states that VLJ and similar groups are a good fit for lawyers in transition who are interested in volun-

teering but may have no experience with specific practice areas. According to Sacks, approximately 50-100 unemployed attorneys approach VLJ annually offering to provide *pro bono* service. She believes *pro bono* service is a great way for lawyers in transition to build practical skills and establish new contacts, while providing a public service. Sacks adds that *pro bono* service is an opportunity to show commitment and skill among other professionals, which may increase your chances of success no matter where you are in your career transition.²¹ She explains there are opportunities for all levels of experience: new attorneys with little to no experience; those who can apply their general practice experience; and those with focused experience who can take on VLJ's more complex matters.

Beyond the clinics, specialized training is provided, with mentors available, so volunteers can take on more traditional forms of representation, all within the volunteer's experience and comfort zone. Still, it is important to approach volunteering with an open mind. Often you will not know where it will lead and what skills you will develop through your service.

Internships

Those interested in pursuing public service might also want to explore internships with the government. A valuable opportunity available to New Jersey lawyers in transition is the Volunteer Associates in Public Service (VAPS) Program offered within both the Division of Law and the Division of Criminal Justice at the Office of the Attorney General.²² The program is open to attorneys of every background. Participants have included new graduates waiting for bar results; furloughed or laid off practitioners; lawyers just out of clerkships, who are still searching for permanent positions; and attorneys re-entering the practice of law after taking a career hia-

tus. At any time there are approximately 25 VAPS participants in total at the Newark, Trenton and Voorhees locations of the Division of Law.

Michelle Miller, the director of the volunteer program at the Division of Law, explains the program gives participants the opportunity to hone many skills, including litigation, counseling, research, writing and more. She explains that the extent of the experience really depends on how much responsibility each volunteer is interested in taking on. While each volunteer must commit to a minimum of 20 hours per week for a minimum of three months, they are welcome to contribute as much time as they are able. Those who can commit to longer periods can benefit from a wide range of responsibilities. Volunteers also have the opportunity to benefit from any section-specific training, in addition to instruction provided by the Attorney General's Advocacy Institute. This training can provide continuing legal education credits for volunteers—an added value for any lawyer experiencing a career transition.²³

It should be noted that the details of the Division of Criminal Justice VAPS Program differ.²⁴

Conclusion

There is no downside to volunteering. There are many opportunities to volunteer in an area you care about and to pursue your interests. While most attorneys will not go so far as to start their own charitable foundations, every lawyer has unique talents and skills to contribute. The power of positive relationships cannot be underestimated, and volunteering is an ideal way to create them. This is especially true for those who are on an active journey to where they want to be. ☺

Sandra Kroll is an attorney with Parker McCay, P.A.'s Mount Laurel office, specializing in medical malpractice defense. She is

a co-chair of the NJSBA Special Committee for Lawyers in Transition and is a former volunteer associate in public service at the New Jersey Office of the Attorney General, Health and Human Services Section within the Law Division.

ENDNOTES

1. Christopher Spera, Ph.D., et al., Corp. for Nat'l & Cmty. Serv. Office of Research and Evaluation, Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment: Does Volunteering Increase Odds of Finding a Job for the Out of Work? 5-6 (2013), *available at* nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/employment_research_report.pdf.
2. *Id.*
3. *Id.* at 9.
4. *Id.* at 13, 15.
5. *Id.* at 19.
6. Telephone interview with Melissa Gertz, Exec. Dir. Cmty. Justice Ctr., (Oct. 1, 2014); Cmty. Justice Ctr., nj-communityjusticecenter.org/?id=about/ (last visited Oct. 1, 2014).
7. Telephone interview with Christina Vassiliou Harvey (Sept. 24, 2014).
8. Wills for Heroes Found., willsforheroes.org/ (last visited Sept. 30, 2014).
9. Telephone interview with Desha L. Jackson (Sept. 29, 2014).
10. DLJ Give to Live Cmty Found., dljgivetolive.unitedcp.org/about-us (last visited Sept. 30, 2014).
11. Jersey City Fashion Week, jerseycityfashionweek.com/about/ (last visited Sept. 30, 2014).
12. Telephone interview with Desha L. Jackson (Sept. 29, 2014).
13. Email from Desha L. Jackson, Program Manager DLJ Give to Live Cmty Found., to author (Sept. 29, 2014, 3:59PM EST)(on file with author).
14. Telephone interview with Christina Vassiliou Harvey (Sept. 24, 2014).
15. *Id.*
16. Telephone interview with Desha L. Jackson (Sept. 29, 2014).
17. Telephone interview with Christina Vassiliou Harvey (Sept. 24, 2014).
18. Telephone interview with Desha L. Jackson (Sept. 29, 2014).
19. Telephone interview with Linda Sikora (June 27, 2014).
20. Telephone interview with Linda Sikora (Sept. 25, 2014).
21. Telephone interview with Karen Sacks (Sept. 30, 2014).
22. State of N.J. Office of The Attorney General, Volunteer Assoc. in Public Service

Program at the N.J. Attorney General's Div. of Law, nj.gov/oag/law/volunteer-associate.htm (last visited Sept. 30, 2014); State of N.J. Office of the Attorney General, Volunteer Assoc. in Public Service Program at the N.J. Attorney General's Div. of Criminal Justice, nj.gov/oag/dcj/volunteer-associate.htm (last visited Sept. 30, 2014).

23. State of N.J. Office of the Attorney General, Volunteer Assoc. in Public Service Program at the N.J. Attorney General's Div. of Law, nj.gov/oag/law/volunteer-associate.htm (last visited Sept. 30, 2014); Telephone interview with Michelle Miller, Assistant Attorney General (Sept. 24, 2014).
24. Details of the Department of Criminal Justice Volunteer Associates in Public Service Program can be found at nj.gov/oag/dcj/volunteer-associate.htm.