

PRO BONO HONOR ROLL



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BOLD honors multiple cases accepted and/or sessions conducted within the month.

PRO BONO SPOTLIGHT

EVERY LITTLE BIT HELPS

BY KIMBERLY MUCHA ABBOTT, ESQ.

When I was first contacted about writing this article, I was reminded that the lawyers highlighted here are often those who log hundreds of pro bono hours or achieve amazing victories for their clients. In reality, the average volunteer probably donates fewer than 50 hours annually and never experiences the thrill of a huge victory worthy of a script for "Boston Legal" or "The Good Wife." Most pro bono attorneys fight smaller, much more routine battles.

Such is the story in my case, as I try to figure out how to help my client – a rarely articulate, 18-year-old, disabled young man – prepare for life after foster care. My client's disabilities (the most concerning of which is Mild Mental Retardation), leave him functioning at a high enough level to disqualify him for most programs or services, yet limit him enough that I lie awake some nights worrying over what will become of him if he is left on his own. We are not waging any legal wars in his case, but we fight lots of small, and often ridiculous, battles.

One of those battles took place on the Thursday before the last long Veterans Day weekend. I had to get my 2-year-old up and off to school, put in several hours at the pizzeria and tie up some loose ends before I could get us packed for our mid-afternoon flight to Atlanta. I did not have a minute to spare – or so I thought.

At about 7:30 a.m., I began a ridiculous, three-hour battle with the school district. My client's IEP (Individual Education Plan: a requirement under federal law for all students with disabilities) was due the following week and, as usual, I planned to participate. I received a curt and matter-of-fact response, indicating that the meeting would be held at 7:30 a.m. Tuesday morning. I replied that the meeting would have to be rescheduled, as that time would not work for me or the foster-father. Then a day's worth of nonsense regarding the simple reschedule of a meeting ensued.

I will spare you the silly details of e-mailing in between making pizza, yelling into my phone while packing, arguing on the car ride to the airport and e-mailing some more, while trying to contain a

rambunctious 2-year-old in line to board the plane. Thanks to intervention by the amazing Special Education staff at Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada, including a call to the head of Compliance & Monitoring for the district, by the time we were on the ground in Atlanta, the problem was solved.

Was the course of my client's life forever altered because this meeting got moved? I am pretty certain it was not. However, I believe it was a meaningful meeting because, through me, my client's voice was heard.

I have argued, complained and nagged in order to get him assistance and services that should come to him, in due course, but won't if he doesn't have an attorney advocating for him. Although these are not monumental victories, they still matter tremendously, because they focus on the things that concern him and affect his everyday life.

The other important reminder my stressful Thursday in November brought me, is that you can *always* find time to do pro bono work. I certainly did not wake up that morning thinking, "I have two to three hours to spare today, maybe I'll do some work on my pro bono case." When the drama started, I just did what needed to be done. None of us has a bunch of free time, but if you make the commitment to take on one new case, or to cover an ask-a-lawyer shift once a month, you will find the time. You will *make* the time.

I have the utmost respect for the amazing attorneys that can donate hundreds of hours a year. However, I am also certain that just a few hours of pro bono work and an occasional everyday triumph can improve the life of a client in need. ■

KIMBERLY MUCHA ABBOTT served as the Pro Bono Project Director from 2004 to 2011. She has been licensed to practice law in Massachusetts since 2002, and is able to engage in pro bono work in Nevada as an Emeritus Attorney pursuant to Supreme Court Rule 49.2. For more information about the Emeritus Program, visit www.nvbar.org or contact Kristina Marzec, Executive Director of the Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission at (702) 317-1404 or kristinam@nvbar.org.

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