

BACK STORY

RENEWING YOURSELF THROUGH SERVICE

BY SARAH J. ODIA, ESQ.

Recently, I read an amazing article by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., from the Shambhala Sun (Sept. 1999), entitled “Helping, Fixing, or Serving?” Her distinction between these three different ways of viewing life helped me reflect on my own pro bono and community service projects. As stated so eloquently by Remen, “[w]hen you help, you see life as weak. When you fix, you see life as broken. When you serve, you see life as whole. Fixing and helping may be the work of the ego, and service the work the soul.”

Thinking about my own experiences, there have been times that I have offered my time or expertise to a community project or a pro bono case without truly “serving” anyone. There are times I helped people in need or fixed problems without truly sharing their experiences. A potential problem with this situation is that the people we are trying to help may feel that inequality; we may end up taking more away from them than we are giving, or we may undermine a greater purpose. Another problem is that always being a helper or fixer can be wearing and cause us to tire of our “service” projects.

We have demanding careers that require a lot of our time and energy. As a mother of two small children and a partner in my law firm, my schedule is bursting. No one would fault me for declining a volunteer opportunity, a community service project or a pro bono case. But, the times I truly serve others in my community, rather than just providing help or a solution/fix, renew my spirit and give me the strength, energy and gratitude to be a better lawyer, parent, community member, etc.

It’s easy to believe the myth that you need a certain amount of experience, expertise, career status or excessive amounts of free time to serve or take a pro bono case. Our fears of overcommitment and reservations about our qualifications can rob us of truly enriching service opportunities. Throughout my 10 years of legal practice, the pro bono cases I have taken through the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada include Children’s Attorney Project cases, bankruptcy cases and a divorce case. I had no bankruptcy, divorce or child custody experience when I took these cases. Instead, what I had was a desire and a need to connect with other people and to serve my community. Those connections and opportunities to serve provided me with far more than just new legal skills. Nor did they drain me or cause me to burn out; instead they renewed me.

This year, I decided to take a time-intensive position on the Board of Directors of the Junior League of Las Vegas (JLLV), an organization of women volunteers serving the Las Vegas community. This organization truly enriches my life and career. It gives me opportunities to serve and connect with diverse groups of people. The most inspiring and renewing experiences I have had with JLLV are not those in which I step into a situation and offer my expertise or solutions. Rather, they are those in which I connect with other people.

How we view pro bono work and community service has a profound impact on whether or not we can balance and sustain such work along with our other professional and family commitments. “Helping” and “fixing” may drain us and cause us to burn out. But serving and connecting will revitalize you and perhaps your career. **NL**



SARAH J. ODIA is a partner at Payne & Fears, LLP. She handles matters involving insurance coverage, business litigation, employment law and construction.

