

Shook Hardy's pro bono division gives young guns a chance to shine

Firm devotes time to helping children

By Will Connaghan, Special Correspondent

Most young attorneys must spend considerable time in the trenches before they are allowed to handle their own cases before a judge or even enter a courtroom. But for some young attorneys at Shook, Hardy & Bacon, pro bono work provides an early opportunity to get some valuable courtroom experience and do good for the community.

There was a time when some lawyers and law firms would cringe at the words 'pro bono.' They wondered how a firm could increase profits by performing free legal work. While there may be some lawyers and law firms that still feel that way, there are many others who carry the pro bono flag with honor. Shook Hardy is one of those firms leading the way with the help of these young attorneys and their experienced mentors.

In 2010, 76 percent of the associates at Shook Hardy's seven offices across the country performed pro bono work, Matt Keenan, chair of the firm's pro bono committee, said. The firm also dedicated 2.3 percent of their billable hours to pro bono work and 33 percent of Shook Hardy lawyers billed more than 20 pro bono hours last year, he said. The firm recommends attorneys bill at least 50 hours of pro bono work towards their billing-hour requirements each year, he said.

Young Guns

Shook Hardy attorneys Guled H. Adam, Russell J. Shankland and Maria Salcedo are good examples of young associates enthused about the pro bono hours they bill.

Adam graduated from Syracuse University School of Law in 2008 and then joined the firm as an associate engaged in product liability defense work. Last year he clocked 250 hours of pro bono time, he said.

His first case came two months after passing the bar exam and involved a juvenile client caught in possession of cocaine, he said. They questioned the original testing of the substance because the client said it was nothing more than candle wax. A week before trial the substance was found to be candle wax so the client was released, Adam said.

"I grew up in the inner city and I can relate to a lot of these kids," Adam said. "I'm African American. Having his mom call me and cry on the phone and say 'I can't believe you did this for my son, he's back home,' that was moving."

Besides juvenile criminal work, Adam has also handled a termination of parental rights case for Shook Hardy.

"I come from a pretty civic-minded family," Adam said. "My mom's always been that way and my dad's always been that way, but I never had the chance to give back. This is like an outlet for me to do that, and to give back to the community."

Adam said Shook Hardy does everything it can to prepare the young associates for juvenile law cases.

"We have a shadow program where first-year associates will go and shadow a senior associate or partner handling a pro bono matter before we're out on our own," he said.

He said his upbringing plays a part in his dedication to the work.

"I was fortunate to have two incredibly gifted and brilliant parents who steered me in the right way," he said. "But, I had a lot of cousins who fell by the wayside and friends who just didn't make it and so I just remember growing up and feeling helpless because there was nothing I could do to help out."

Russell J. Shankland is new to the pro bono work at Shook Hardy. He has billed about 40 pro bono hours since joining the firm last year.

Shankland said he likes the fact he gets to argue cases in court so early in his career.

"It's a real hands-on experience for a young attorney," he said. "In the juvenile division you have oversight from the staff attorneys, but you're really on your own there, which is part of the fun."

Before joining Shook Hardy, Shankland had some experiences that prepared him for his pro bono work. He argued a pro bono case before the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals after graduating from Northwestern University School of Law last year and he taught English to Romanian children during a stint with the Peace Corps from 2005-2007.

"What I learned in the Peace Corps is that there's an inherent satisfaction that comes from helping people who need help, Shankland said. "When you wake up in the morning, and your goal is to basically figure out a way to do good, it's just a really, really satisfying experience. I think that probably is what relates to the draw to do pro bono work."

Shankland said the pro bono cases are a nice departure from his work as a business litigator.

"Working in business litigation, you have some interaction



Maria Salcedo, Russell J. Shankland and Guled H. Adam

(Photo by Bob Tierney)

with your clients, but it's always sort of a business issue," Shankland said.

He said one of the things he enjoys about the pro bono work is talking to clients who are affected by what's going on in juvenile court.

"At this point, I think it's the interaction with the clients, and I think it's the interaction with people who need the help," Shankland said. "To some extent some of these people have had bad experiences with attorneys. So when you can go, and really put forth some effort, and try to get a good result, you can tell a lot of your clients just feel good about it."

Shankland offers this advice to new associates at the firm. "I would say to jump right into it, because once you jump in they know your name," he said. "So you just have to jump head first into it and don't say no to anything."

Maria R. Salcedo graduated from the University of Kansas School of Law in 2009 and immediately joined Shook Hardy. She cares about her involvement with pro bono work.

"The main case I've been working on this year is an abuse-and-neglect case where I'm representing the mother," Salcedo said. "I have also represented several minors in the detention docket. I appear in court on their behalf and represent them."

Work that Salcedo did while in law school helped prepare her for the cases, she said. She volunteered as a student attorney for the Douglas County, Kan. Legal Aid office.

"When I was in law school at KU my 3L year I had a license where I could appear in court and represent clients under the supervision of an attorney," she said. "So I did that for a year and it definitely gave me experience and just kind of helped me understand better first how to work with clients and how to work in a courtroom, how to work with prosecutors and judges and how to work with different clients. That was definitely helpful now that I am doing it on my own."

Salcedo also finds the pro bono work a stimulating departure from her work defending complex product liability cases.

"My regular practice is completely different," she said. "We absolutely do nothing related to family law or juvenile law or anything like that."

She said the work gives her an opportunity to learn about different areas that she wouldn't otherwise practice.

"If I was not involved in pro bono I just would not have a chance to be working with these families," she said. "It also gives me the opportunity to know more of the local attorneys

and judges. I think it keeps me intellectually challenged and I enjoy it."

Salcedo said pro bono work also gave her an opportunity to be in the courtroom and interact with clients early on.

"It helps me just kind of lose the nerves and know that I have done it before," she said.

She finds the skills she has gained by being involved in pro bono are also very practical.

"A lot of people have family law questions and that type of thing," Salcedo said. "I think that I'm using my skills to help people do things that I know means a lot to our clients."

Pro Bono Division

Judge Charles Atwell, presiding judge of the 16th Judicial Circuit Court, was the administrative judge for Family Court from 2008-2010. He said Shook Hardy attorneys are dedicated to what they do and they get good results for their clients. Atwell said other firms in the Kansas City area also provide excellent pro bono work and all are an invaluable asset to the justice system.

"The pro bonos together are a huge plus for the juvenile court," Atwell said. "They handle a large volume of cases. I feel good about our juvenile system out there, and I think one of the reasons is because of the work they do."

Keenan said the firm's strong commitment to pro bono work has evolved in the 25 years he has been with the firm. "As the firm has developed specialties, I think we've recognized that pro bono is something that we should develop a specialty in too," Keenan said. "One of my focuses is to try to better screen the cases that we take so that the cases that we handle here represent a commitment to children and children's rights."

Keenan joined the pro bono committee six years ago and has been the chair for the past two years. "We have learned that in the area of children's rights you can give attorneys the opportunity to make a significant impact in the lives of a young man or woman," he said. "You can do so without getting involved in a long protracted matter. You can make an impact without really spending any of the firm's resources other than the attorney's time and then the attorneys can move on to their paying clients."

Keenan acknowledged that a group of young Shook Hardy attorneys, including Adam, Shankland and Salcedo, have stepped up to handle many hours of pro bono work. "What's been very exciting for me is that we've been able to develop about 15-20 young associates who have been energized on our efforts to advocate for children and these attorneys have really done some amazing things," he said. "Those young men and women are going to be the future of the firm and they're going to be the future of the pro bono efforts."

Keenan credits Lori Burns-Bucklew, State Sen. Jolie Justus and Megan Roth with keeping the pro bono division running so well. The three experienced attorneys handle nothing but pro bono cases for the firm. He said there are no other firms in Kansas City that can boast such a staff devoted to pro bono.

Megan C. Roth joined Shook Hardy in June 2010 after spending eight years with the Missouri Public Defender's Office.

"I went to law school because I knew I wanted to represent people who needed a voice and didn't have the funds and the ability to hire someone to be that voice for them," Roth said. "It was hard for me to imagine ever leaving the public defender's office, but it was through my work for them I met Lori Burns-Bucklew and Jolie Justus here at Shook and I became aware of all the incredible work that Shook does."

Keenan said the reality is that most pro bono work is not glamorous.

"What's exciting for me is that we have a subset of our associates here who are taking those kinds of cases on every week and they are stepping up, and they are carrying the torch on behalf of the profession, on behalf of the community and on behalf of our firm," he said.

Roth said the young attorneys are all hard workers who bring a special energy to the work.

"For me they help in two different ways," Roth said. "They provide the actual time and effort working up these cases, meeting with clients, advising clients, going to court making arguments. For me they provide a second form of relief and that is they energize me. By working with the new lawyers, who are so involved, I become more inspired and more willing to help. For me they are a source of strength and energy not just for their clients but for their co-workers."