Making a Difference

The Pennsylvania Bar News column that highlights Pennsylvania attorneys who make a difference in their communities by providing extraordinary pro bono service and/or other community services in the public interest.

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Wendy Castor Hess is a founder and partner at Goldblum & Hess, Jenkintown. She is co-chair of the PBA Immigration Law Committee and chair of the Philadelphia Bar Association Immigration Law Committee.

Describe your pro bono work.
I believe one of the most critical problems in our community is the lack of accurate and timely information regarding our immigration laws. Recent immigrants, many of whom do not speak English, do not understand our laws and cannot navigate our complex legal system and fall prey to unscrupulous notaries or travel agents and even to attorneys who lack experience in the immigration field. Because I have seen the lasting, irreparable damage that immigration laws create, one of my goals is to provide accurate information on immigration law to the immigrant community and to fellow attorneys.

In my leadership roles with the PBA and Philadelphia bar immigration law committees, I organize meetings and seminars to discuss immigration laws and their impact, including the Obama administration’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals memorandum. I met recently with members of the Liberian community to discuss the impact of Ebola on their communities and the new immigration announcement regarding the virus.

My fluency in Spanish allows me to work directly with the Mexican Consulate in Philadelphia and other Spanish-speaking organizations. I educate and work with other members of the bar in the business and corporate sectors to stress the role of immigration law in their practices — such as performing due diligence during mergers and acquisitions when foreign nationals are employed by their companies, ensuring that employee I-9 forms are completed correctly and working with corporate counsel to structure foreign entities appropriately or transfer key foreign personnel to U.S. offices.

Why do you participate in pro bono?
I participate in pro bono because of what I learned at home and the values that were instilled in me — a moral, ethical and emotional need to give back. My father, who was raised in poverty by a single mother, obtained a baseball scholarship to an expensive private school, which forever changed his life and allowed him to provide for his family, including sending me to law school. When the first wave of Cuban refugees entered the U.S., I remember my father taking furniture and clothing from our house to help resettle them. I had no idea where Cuba was or what a refugee was, but I was taught that because we had food, clothing and a roof over our heads that we had an obligation to give back. I learned early on that whatever material possessions I had were a great privilege and not a right and that I needed to continue to earn them. These lessons have stayed with me throughout my life. Now, as an attorney, I feel very blessed. I have a roof over my head in a country where I feel safe. I have a warm bed to sleep in each night, health insurance, a family to love and protect me, and wonderful friends and colleagues. I speak English and can navigate the legal system in my country. I feel strongly that everyone is entitled to have these “basic needs” fulfilled and that I must do all within my power to make this so.

How did you first become involved?
My first job after law school was with the Travelers Aid Society in Chicago, which provided social and legal services to low-income individuals, especially refugees, asylees and immigrant families. Until then I had no idea of the lack of available legal services for people who do not have the financial resources to hire a private attorney. I saw not only the great need to provide such services but also the need to provide community education and outreach, because the better the community and bar understand the laws, the better the legal representation.

What have been the personal rewards?
There is no better feeling in the world than knowing that you have helped make others’ lives easier and assisted them in reaching their potential. Each and every time I see the successes of my clients — their children’s graduation from high school and admission to college, their establishment of successful, job-creating businesses — it makes me smile knowing that I have played a small role in helping them to get to that point.