Robert Datorre, Dauphin County

Robert Datorre is assistant counsel for the Pennsylvania Department of Education in Harrisburg. He is chair of the PBA GLBT Rights Committee, vice chair of the Education Law Section and immediate past chair of the PBA Young Lawyers Division (YLD). He serves on several PBA committees. He is a member of the PBA House of Delegates and a life fellow of the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation. Datorre is a frequent lecturer and presenter for the Pennsylvania Bar Institute and the Pennsylvania Office of General Counsel (OGC).

Why do you participate in pro bono?
Pro bono should be — and I think is — part of what defines lawyers and the legal profession. We live in the most democratic and free nation in the world. We can’t expect that government or some other person will provide all of the services for our communities. As lawyers, we must participate in making these services available — from providing legal assistance to the poor to helping educate children about our system of laws and government. Jim Schultz, the governor’s general counsel, has repeatedly encouraged all OGC attorneys to be active in pro bono programs and the support from the OGC for pro bono participation is outstanding. There are many wonderful OGC attorneys who set great examples of how lawyers can be active pro bono participants.

Describe your pro bono work.
The majority of my pro bono work has been in the area of civic and law-related education. I participate in at least one program each year and, in most cases, a few programs a year at different schools. It’s a great way to volunteer in my home school district, where my children attend elementary school, and to help schools that need assistance due to their limited resources. I hope it helps educators prepare students to be successful adults. I have also participated in an OGC program that offered services at disaster-relief sites following Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee. Recently I helped lead the YLD’s efforts to expand our highly successful “Wills for Heroes” program, which provides free wills and estate-planning documents to first responders, to include veterans.

How did you become involved?
I was invited to participate in a law-related education program by a criminal court judge and by a friend who was opposing counsel in a case. My fellow lawyer and I spoke about our jobs and how we remain friends despite representing opposing parties. The judge gave a great presentation on the real consequences of criminal behavior. I have been hooked on civic and law-related education programs ever since.

What have been the personal rewards?
It’s the smiles on the students’ faces, handmade thank-you cards from elementary school classes and invitations from teachers and administrators to present again the following year. It’s the thought that with PBA President Frank O’Connor’s commitment to veterans, the PBA will make huge strides in serving those who put so much on the line for freedom.

Describe your other community service.
I am a huge advocate for the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation. I am active in our church, which provides services on a regular basis all over the county and even as far away as Baltimore. I have also started focusing my running “addiction” to benefit others, from raising money for the Organization for Autism Research and other charities to motivating others to lead healthier lifestyles.

Have your pro bono cases dealt with legal issues different from your regular practice areas? If so, how did you adapt?
Most of my pro bono work focuses on civic and law-related education, so I am able to draw from my knowledge of government. But being in front of a classroom, cafeteria or auditorium full of students did take some getting used to.

How does it “make a difference”?
There are countless stories of children who became motivated to pursue a particular career or to change some aspect of their lives for the better because they heard a guest present on a profession or subject in their class. Although I don’t expect that I will be one of those guest speakers, I hope that the students leave the programs having learned something new and are able to apply it to their lives.