Making a Difference

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

James R. Carroll Jr., Bradford

On Sept. 8, 2011, the town of Athens, in Bradford County, was hit hard by flooding. Approximately 450 homes were damaged and more than a fifth of the county’s active lawyers were displaced by flooding. James R. Carroll Jr. lost both his office and his home in the flood. Nevertheless, Carroll was out helping area residents before the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) arrived. Once those disaster centers were in place, Carroll helped the PBA connect people in need with those organizations.

Why do you participate in pro bono?
I saw that there were a great many questions that flood victims had in relation to insurance, applying for FEMA aid, landlord/tenant issues, etc.

How did you first become involved?
Once the flood waters receded and everyone realized how much damage had been done and how many families were displaced, the Red Cross set up a shelter at a nearby fire hall. I saw on Facebook that people had a lot of questions and they were becoming frustrated. I decided that I would offer free legal advice at the shelter every afternoon. I posted that on Facebook and I contacted the local papers and radio stations. I would normally show up in mud-covered clothes and waterproof boots because during the day I was trying to clean out my own home and my own office.

Have your pro bono cases dealt with legal issues different from your practice area? If so, how did you adapt?
Many of the issues were landlord-tenant-related and I had a good understanding of that area of the law. I was able to use my experience as a personal injury litigator for the issues involving insurance. At night I would scour FEMA’s website for information and procedures so I could answer questions regarding how to apply, how to appeal a decision, time frames, etc. I was also going through this procedure myself with my own home and my own business.

What have been the personal rewards to you?
I enjoy helping people — and especially, given these circumstances, where they could not help themselves. Many people who came to me really only needed someone to talk to and to tell their stories. It was a pleasure and an honor listening to them. Personally, it also helped me get through the horror of basically being homeless and living out of friends’ basements and in a hotel and trying to clean out my home and my business, all the while trying to keep my business afloat.