Making a Difference

Jonathan D. Koltash, Harrisburg

Jonathan D. Koltash is with the Governor’s Office of General Counsel, Office of Chief Counsel, Department of Labor and Industry, in Harrisburg. He is the PBA Young Lawyers Division (YLD) Zone 3 co-chair, secretary/treasurer of the PBA Administrative Law Section, vice chair of the PBA Government Lawyers Committee and a leader in that committee’s public service outreach. Most recently Koltash has been working with the PBA’s Pro Bono Office and Government Lawyers Committee and the Office of Attorney General to set up training for Project PEACE.

Describe your pro bono work.
My pro bono focus has been working with students through law-related education programs. Over the past four years I have served as both a district and regional coordinator for the PBA YLD Statewide High School Mock Trial Competition. I have overseen local and regional competitions, worked with local judges and court staff to organize the competition and seen to it that the various high school teams were prepared for the competition. I was recently named a co-chair of the statewide competition, in addition to my roles as a regional and district co-coordinator. I also volunteer to coach moot court teams at Widener University School of Law and mock trial teams at Central Penn College.

Previously, I was a group leader of the Office of General Counsel’s Civic Alliance Program where I led a team of lawyers teaching a civics program in the Harrisburg School District. I am also a longtime advocate of the SeniorLaw helpline and have set up training for government lawyers to participate in that program.

I am an assistant site coordinator for Widener Law’s Volunteer Income Tax Association (VITA), providing low-income and elderly citizens with free tax preparation. Through VITA I work with law students, assisting them in developing client interview skills while also providing a free but vital service to low-income and elderly individuals. I also volunteer with the SeniorLaw helpline.

I have also participated in various programs to assist individuals in non-law-related ways. For example, after the floods that affected central Pennsylvania a few years ago, I worked with Lend-A-Hand, removing damaged parts of homes for low-income families.

Why do you participate in pro bono?
I believe lawyers have an obligation to help educate our youth on the legal process and to assist those who are unable to afford legal representation. We can easily make a positive impact in the community by offering a little of our time.

How did you become involved?
At first I was unsure of how to participate in pro bono activities because, as a government attorney, I do not carry malpractice insurance. Participation in organizations such as the PBA and the local Inns of Court led me to realize how many opportunities exist beyond traditional pro bono services.

Have your pro bono cases dealt with legal issues different from your regular practice areas? If so, how did you adapt?
The pro bono work that I do is different from my regular practice and developed from another passion I have, teaching. When I cannot draw from my experiences, I have adapted by asking questions and looking for answers. I enjoy the challenge of developing new skills while volunteering for worthy causes.

What have been the personal rewards?
I find personal reward in knowing that I have provided a student with the opportunity to learn, and I hope I have made a positive impact on that young person’s life. I’ve also had the opportunity to meet new people and develop professional relationships.

How does it “make a difference”?
Law-related education helps young people to engage with our court system in a positive way, shows students that lawyers do positive things and allows me to serve as a role model for young people. Pro bono work also allows me to help a client solve a problem that may change that person’s life. In addition I see the PBA Government Lawyers Committee’s Project PEACE effort as the first step in the committee’s plans to adopt a Harrisburg-area middle school and establish a youth court there to help break the school-to-prison pipeline that traditional school discipline can feed.