

The Pro Bono Spotlight features attorneys chosen by the Texas Access to Justice Commission or the State Bar of Texas for their exceptional commitment to pro bono work. Find pro bono opportunities, support, and inspiration at probonotexas.org.

Stephanie MARRONE

FROM THE TIME SHE BEGAN LAW SCHOOL, STEPHANIE MARRONE ALWAYS HAD PRO BONO WORK ON HER MIND. AS A LAW STUDENT, SHE KNEW SHE EVENTUALLY WANTED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE PROVIDING LEGAL ASSISTANCE TO THOSE IN NEED. ONCE SHE ASSUMED THE ROLE OF MANAGING ATTORNEY AND PRO BONO COORDINATOR AT HOUSTON-BASED BEACON LAW IN AUGUST 2021, SHE SEIZED AN OPPORTUNITY TO BROADEN HER IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY, WORKING WITH A TEAM OF DEDICATED ATTORNEYS AND VOLUNTEERS WITH A SHARED VISION. MARRONE SPOKE TO THE TEXAS BAR JOURNAL ABOUT HER RESPONSIBILITIES AT BEACON, THE IMPORTANCE OF PROVIDING LEGAL AID WHERE NEEDED, AND THE PRO BONO EXPERIENCES OF HER TEAM.

INTERVIEW BY WILL KORN
PHOTO COURTESY OF STEPHANIE MARRONE



WHAT KIND OF PRO BONO WORK DO YOU DO AND HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN DOING IT?

After my licensure in November 2013, I worked on immigration and Social Security pro bono cases. My current position as managing attorney and pro bono coordinator at Houston-based legal aid provider Beacon Law means that while I no longer volunteer as a pro bono attorney, I enjoy assisting private attorneys, in-house counsel, and others with their own pro bono cases. It is gratifying to help others in their journey, and of course, Beacon Law could not do the amount of good work that we do for our clients without the valuable support of our pro bono attorneys.

WHY IS PRO BONO WORK IMPORTANT TO YOU?

The most popular type of pro bono cases I assign are criminal record clearing (expunction) and sealing (nondisclosure). Approximately 9 million Texans have a criminal history record, which can significantly impair their ability to obtain housing and employment, as four in five landlords and nine in 10 employers run background checks. While Beacon Law staff work tirelessly to help our clients, pro bono help is critical in allowing us to aid as many applicants as possible.

WAS THERE A PARTICULAR EXPERIENCE YOU HAD THAT INSPIRED YOU

TO DIVE INTO PRO BONO FOR THE FIRST TIME?

I attended law school seeking a career in legal aid. While looking for work post-bar, I reached out to different organizations to volunteer. I hoped to gain experience in different areas of the law. While law school taught me to read, write, and research, it left a gap in terms of practice. I wanted to get my feet wet and start acquiring the knowledge I needed to become a successful practitioner while also helping clients who could not afford assistance.

HOW WOULD YOU SAY HANDLING PRO BONO WORK HAS BENEFITED YOUR LAW CAREER?

Being a pro bono coordinator means meeting attorneys from all practice areas who want to do good. There is no shortage of volunteers who want to spend their priceless time and talents aiding others—they just need a place to start. I thoroughly enjoy teaching and supporting volunteers. Not only do our clients obtain indispensable assistance, but I get to meet fascinating people and introduce them to critical areas of practice that affect our clients' day-to-day lives.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO AN ATTORNEY WHO IS CONSIDERING DOING PRO BONO FOR THE FIRST TIME?

Attorneys interested in taking their first pro bono case might stop short of volunteering because they worry that they “don't know what they're doing,” which can be an overwhelming and stressful feeling. Additionally, some pro bono cases can be long-lived and time consuming. My suggestion is to explore the many different types of pro bono cases available (there's no shortage of need!) and choose one that suits the pro bono attorney's or volunteer's desired time commitment and comfort level. My job is to ensure they feel supported and enjoy a pleasant volunteer experience: I want them to feel accomplished and take another case!

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT PRO BONO WORK?

A common misconception about pro bono work is that you must be a litigator to volunteer. Most volunteers I work with are transactional attorneys. Expunction cases do not often require a hearing: It's drafting documents and corresponding with necessary parties via email—no courtroom experience required!

WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU'VE LEARNED ABOUT PRO BONO WORK THROUGH YOUR EXPERIENCE AS BEACON'S PRO BONO COORDINATOR?

Often, I see our volunteers' eyes opened to the challenges our legal aid clients face. Once, after explaining a frustrating truth about the justice system, my pro bono attorneys were rightfully incensed and used their legal skills to move mountains for their client. I'm happy to have new, powerful allies in the fight against injustice.

DESCRIBE A PARTICULARLY MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE YOU'VE HAD WITH A PRO BONO CASE.

Recently, I assigned what I thought was a “slam dunk” case. Unfortunately, the judge used their discretion to deny our petition. I was devastated. Would this amazing volunteer want to take another case? I assumed not, since losing a case can be frustrating and painful. To my surprise, the pro bono volunteer instead was galvanized. I am happy and proud to support such tireless and zealous advocates. **TBJ**

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