

The ATJ Pro Bono Champion is a quarterly feature highlighting the work of an attorney chosen by the Texas Access to Justice Commission. To learn more about pro bono work in Texas or to get involved, go to probonotexas.org.

Fawaz A. BHAM

FAWAZ A. BHAM IS AN ASSOCIATE OF HUNTON ANDREWS KURTH IN DALLAS, WHERE HE SERVES ON THE FIRM'S PRO BONO COMMITTEE. HE LAUNCHED AND LEADS THE DALLAS VOLUNTEER ATTORNEY PROGRAM'S VIRTUAL LEGAL CLINIC PLATFORM IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. BHAM LEADS THE DVAP SMALL BUSINESS CLINICS IN THE DALLAS AREA AND VOLUNTEERS AT THE DALLAS BAR ASSOCIATION LEGALLINE CLINICS.

INTERVIEW BY ADAM FADEREWSKI
PHOTO COURTESY OF FAWAZ A. BHAM



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

Since joining the Texas Bar in 2013, I have worked on different pro bono matters including forming LLCs, drafting estate documents, volunteering at legal clinics, advising entrepreneurs on small business issues, assisting immigrants preparing personal statements for their immigration applications, presenting real estate 101 seminars, and being part of a team litigating to resolve clients' issues. Prior to the pandemic, a pro bono initiative that took the majority of my pro bono time was organizing and leading in-person small business clinics with an array of community partners in Dallas, such as the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program, WiNGs, Texas CBAR, LiftFund DFW Women's Business Center, BCL of Texas, and many more organizations. We created these clinics a bit differently than other intake clinics by allowing clients to hold a one-on-one consultation with the volunteering attorney for 15 minutes to discuss any small business issues they may be facing regardless of whether or not the client may ultimately qualify for further assistance due to a particular organization's income/revenue qualification requirements. This allowed the clients to sit down with a professional to gain meaningful insights into their legal issues and possible solutions for their business. Clients left the clinic more oriented in understanding what resources they may need to consult and the direction they may need to take their business to continue their success.

WHY IS PRO BONO IMPORTANT TO YOU?

While it is often easier to think of an attorney's career in a linear fashion (i.e., the more time billed to matters involving one's specialty, the better attorney that results), I believe it is the time you commit to other causes while upholding the high standards of your practice that increases your intellectual stamina, deepens your resolve to excel in this demanding profession, and accelerates the use of your legal knowledge to real-world matters. Hearing a pro bono client's issues quickly places an attorney's own daily struggles in perspective and assisting a pro bono client with their issues is often akin to restoring their faith in our legal system. Every time you are given the opportunity to serve, try to avail it!

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM DOING PRO BONO?

I am always amazed at how many resources from different organizations are available to assist attorneys who are volunteering in a practice area that is different than their own practice and how colleagues, judicial staff, judges, and others step up to assist you when you are assisting others. I learned early on that the hardest aspect of pro bono work is actually stepping up. The resources, answers, guidance, and practical tips all come because you essentially join a pro bono community that has the same goal in mind—placing your client in a better place than he or she was in before you volunteered to help. I have also learned different areas of law that I would never have ventured into but for the pro bono work. My advice to young lawyers starting out in the field is to start pro bono work sooner than when they feel "ready" and just take the leap.

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

It only takes a limited interaction with a pro bono client to remember how fundamental and essential the pro bono help one offers is for clients and to realize how your small drop in the pro bono service bucket ripples into an incredible wave of relief in their lives. Pro bono work expands your scope of legal knowledge, promotes your own business development, and reenergizes your legal passion. Pro bono work is an indispensable part of being the best lawyer you can be, period.

SHARE ONE OF YOUR FAVORITE PRO BONO SUCCESS STORIES.

Since April 2020, my focus has changed from driving in-person clinics to creating and leading the first-ever virtual legal intake clinic platform for the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program. DVAP was forced to close all of its 14 in-person clinics in March, and soon thereafter, we were able to deliver a platform taking the in-person clinics virtual. Since April, the platform has enabled us to hold a virtual clinic every week where volunteering attorneys connect with clients seeking assistance with divorce, custody, landlord/tenant, employment, estate, small business issues, and other legal issues. To date, we have held close to 30 clinics and helped over 1,500 applicants in the Dallas area. The platform is a win for our community because of the increase of accessibility to pro bono services, a win for our colleagues because it provides greater flexibility in when and how attorneys can provide pro bono services with resources at their fingertips, and a win for DVAP because it has streamlined the clinic process enabling DVAP to ultimately help even more individuals that need help the most. It has been a rewarding experience because during this pandemic, everyone is taking a leap in the technology space and it was finally time to move pro bono legal services into the next realm as well. **TBJ**