

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.

Robert C. UHL

INFLUENCED BY FAMILY AND FRIENDS WITH STRONG MILITARY TIES, ROBERT C. UHL LEARNED THE VALUE OF HELPING OTHERS AT A YOUNG AGE. A PRO BONO EXPERIENCE AT HIS FIRM, SIDLEY AUSTIN, EARLY IN HIS CAREER HELPED HIM SHAPE HIS PASSION FOR SERVICE. IN 2021, HE BILLED APPROXIMATELY 211 PRO BONO HOURS, THE MOST OF ANY ASSOCIATE IN SIDLEY'S DALLAS OFFICE.

INTERVIEW BY **WILL KORN**
PHOTO COURTESY OF SIDLEY AUSTIN



HOW DID YOU GET STARTED DOING PRO BONO WORK?

My parents always taught me to look for ways to help others. When I joined Sidley Austin after law school, I was pleased that the firm highlighted multiple pro bono initiatives during our first-year orientation and encouraged all attorneys to participate. Just after I started, the firm hosted a pro bono clinic for Veterans Day to assess veterans for claims for Combat-Related Special Compensation, or CRSC. Though I did not know what CRSC was, I knew I wanted to help veterans, so I signed up. Not two months into my professional legal career, I certainly felt lost walking into the conference room to interview a Vietnam War hero who had seen more than I could possibly imagine. But walking out, I knew I had found my way to help.

WHY DO YOU THINK PRO BONO WORK IS IMPORTANT?

The old adage and Bible verse rings especially true for me, "To whom much is given, much is expected." My faith, my upbringing, and my respect for the role attorneys play in our democracy reiterate my belief that all service is important, but especially service to those who cannot help themselves in a legal system that is often difficult to navigate for even the most well-educated. As attorneys, we are privileged to be trained officers of that legal system, so I feel a sense of duty to use the skills I have learned to benefit those who lack the resources to navigate the system on their own.

HOW HAS YOUR BACKGROUND INFLUENCED YOUR PRO BONO EFFORTS?

My two grandfathers served in the U.S. Army—one in World War II and one in Korea—and two of my closest friends serve in the U.S. Navy, so the military has long been part of my life. More

importantly, my father instilled in me a great passion for this country and in particular, for serving, honoring, and thanking the veterans of this country who sacrifice for our freedom. He taught me to love the United States of America and the state of Texas and, though they are not always perfect, to do the best I could to make them a little more so.

ARE THERE ANY MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT PRO BONO?

To me, the biggest misconception about pro bono is that it is too time consuming, that taking on a project means locking yourself in to hours and hours of free work. Even one to two hours or less have tangible, meaningful impacts on people's lives. Just because a project is short or small does not make it any less helpful, and the feeling of helping someone—big or small—can't be beat.

DESCRIBE A MEMORABLE PRO BONO EXPERIENCE YOU'VE HAD.

After three years of working for one Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, fighting through multiple rounds of appeals, we finally won her an award for CRSC for post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. This was the first CRSC case I worked on, and it turned out to be my most proud moment as a lawyer. A sergeant in the U.S. Army, this particular veteran was truly crippled with physical and mental injuries that she developed in Iraq and Afghanistan after a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device exploded a car in her convoy and after another one of her convoys was engaged in a firefight. Now supported nearly full-time by her daughter just to get by day to day, she sacrificed essentially everything she had for this country.

During our initial interview, after she finished telling us in vivid detail about all the horrible things she saw in combat, the terror she felt, and the pain she suffered from losing friends and being injured, she told us how proud she was to have served and how she would immediately sign up to go back to the Middle East if the Army would let her. Her story was incredibly powerful. But it was even more humbling for me as a young lawyer—here was someone who had lost so much and had such a difficult path, and I'm sitting in an air-conditioned office thousands of miles away, safe and free. She showed me what it means to be a true American, and how thankful we should be for the veterans who protect our freedom.

The CRSC Board initially denied all three of her claims for compensation from multiple injuries. Not discouraged, we reapplied for one injury—and won—then applied for three new injuries that she had developed and been diagnosed with after working near burn pits in Afghanistan, and appealed her claim for PTSD to the Board for the Correction of Military Records. I am pleased to report that the U.S. Army Human Resources Command approved her claim for PTSD.

WHAT ADVICE OR MESSAGE MIGHT YOU GIVE TO AN ATTORNEY WHO IS ON THE FENCE ABOUT GETTING INVOLVED WITH PRO BONO WORK?

Answer the call! These CRSC cases have been some of the most rewarding projects of my entire career. I promise you'll get more enjoyment out of getting involved in pro bono work and helping someone than they will from your legal services. It's a privilege and a duty. **TBJ**

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