

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.

Maddy DWERTMAN

MADDY DWERTMAN, A SENIOR ASSOCIATE OF BAKER BOTTS IN AUSTIN, FOCUSES THEIR LAW PRACTICE ON REPRESENTING TRANS AND GENDER NONCONFORMING REFUGEES SEEKING ASYLUM IN THE UNITED STATES. THE RECIPIENT OF THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION'S 2022 PRO BONO PUBLICO AWARD SPOKE TO THE *TEXAS BAR JOURNAL* ABOUT WHAT THEIR PRO BONO EFFORTS MEAN TO THEM.

INTERVIEW BY **WILL KORN**
PHOTO COURTESY OF BAKER BOTTS



I KNOW YOU ARE ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN AMERICAN GATEWAYS, A NONPROFIT FOCUSED ON IMMIGRATION SERVICES, AS AN AVENUE TO YOUR PRO BONO WORK. WHAT DOES YOUR WORK WITH AMERICAN GATEWAYS MEAN TO YOU?

There is a tremendous need for legal services among immigrant communities in Central Texas. As a lawyer living and working in Austin, I wanted to help respond to this critical need. Partnering with American Gateways has made this possible. American Gateways has not only given me the opportunity to take on meaningful pro bono work, but also provided invaluable training, mentorship, and community.

The work itself is both challenging and rewarding. Much of my immigration practice is focused on the representation of trans and gender nonconforming, or TGNC, refugees in immigration removal proceedings. In addition to the need for legal representation among refugees generally, trans people are particularly susceptible to violence and discrimination, often falling

entirely outside the bounds of state protection. Thus, my practice in this space is largely a response to the targeted violence against and criminalization of trans immigrants, as well as their historical exclusion from mainstream narratives and policy. Working with individual clients so that they feel empowered to tell their own stories of violation, struggle, and resilience within a frame that supports their claims for humanitarian relief is incredibly rewarding and beautiful.

AS A TRANS AND NONBINARY ATTORNEY, WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU TO BE ABLE TO STRENGTHEN THE COMMUNITY'S REPRESENTATION?

I have been open with my trans identity since I started practicing law in 2014. And I think it's critically important that TGNC people have a voice in conversations and work around trans rights and justice. Because of this, I continually seek out opportunities to address and advance trans rights—whether that be through direct legal representation; work with bar associations, nonprofit organizations and student groups; or internal diversity initiatives at my firm.

YOU WERE A RECIPIENT OF THE ABA'S 2022 PRO BONO PUBLICO AWARD AFTER LOGGING HUNDREDS OF PRO BONO HOURS DURING THE PANDEMIC. HOW ARE YOU ABLE TO MANAGE YOUR TIME HANDLING PRO BONO WORK PLUS YOUR NORMAL CASEWORK?

Pro bono work is simply part of my daily practice. I don't differentiate among pro bono work and other casework, so pro bono doesn't require any special time management. It also helps that my colleagues value and support my pro bono commitments.

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

Pro bono work can seem daunting at times, especially when it falls outside one's typical practice area. But both experience and subject matter expertise can be developed by taking a pro bono case. Many legal services organizations provide training and ongoing mentorship to pro bono attorneys. And there are also plenty of opportunities to serve as co-counsel alongside attorneys with subject matter expertise.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A NEWLY LICENSED ATTORNEY ABOUT PRO BONO WORK?

I encourage everyone to get involved with pro bono early and often. Start by identifying an issue or cause you're passionate about or connecting with an organization you support. Once you get involved, other pro bono opportunities will find you. Also, keep in mind that pro bono is so much more than a professional obligation. Pro bono is critical to expanding access to justice. It also offers opportunities to develop and hone legal skills, network with other legal professionals, cultivate partnerships with legal services organizations, and gain exposure to substantive aspects of the law outside the normal scope of your practice. **TBJ**

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