

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.

Kristin COPE

WHEN IT COMES TO ATTORNEYS ADDING PRO BONO WORK TO THEIR REPERTOIRE, “JUST START SOMEWHERE,” SAYS KRISTIN COPE, A PARTNER IN O’MELVENY, BASED IN DALLAS. SERVING AS PRO BONO CHAIR OF O’MELVENY’S TEXAS OFFICES, COPE HAS GAINED A DEEPER INSIGHT INTO THE NEEDS OF HER COMMUNITY AND HAS HELPED CONNECT PEOPLE IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE WITH SUPPORT.

THOUGH HER PRACTICE FOCUSES ON TRIAL AND APPELLATE LITIGATION, SHE APPLIES A DIVERSE SKILL SET TO A WIDE RANGE OF PRO BONO VENTURES. COPE SPOKE TO THE TEXAS BAR JOURNAL ABOUT WHAT PRO BONO WORK HAS MEANT TO HER LAW CAREER AND TO THOSE SHE ASSISTS.

INTERVIEW BY **WILL KORN**
PHOTO COURTESY OF **KRISTIN COPE**



WHAT KIND OF PRO BONO WORK DO YOU DO AND HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN DOING IT? I’ve been passionate about pro bono work since law school. When a client’s circumstances move me or the legal issues fascinate me, I can’t help but jump in. I’ve worked on veteran benefits, administrative agency appeals, habeas appeals, pro se divorce, a child abuse case, religious liberty preservation, and Native American rights.

WHY IS PRO BONO WORK IMPORTANT TO YOU? Pro bono work is our best chance to make a difference in the world. I really believe that our legal system, though it has many flaws, is a special one. It can be a force for good and for justice, and that’s a big part of why I became a lawyer. But for many, that system is confusing, unfair, or inaccessible. As lawyers, we are uniquely equipped to navigate that world, so every lawyer has a duty to use our skills to help those who most need our expertise and to improve the system itself, one case at a time.

WHAT IS A PARTICULAR EXPERIENCE YOU HAD THAT INFLUENCED YOU TO TAKE ON MORE PRO BONO WORK? When I took an undergraduate constitutional law class, I realized how many key precedential cases reached all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court because a nonprofit had pursued them or because an individual with so much at stake was championed by pro bono lawyers. I knew I wanted to be a part of that process.

HOW WOULD YOU SAY HANDLING PRO BONO WORK HAS BENEFITED YOUR LAW CAREER? Pro bono work provides unbelievable professional opportunities early on. My first stand-up opportunities came through pro bono, not giant corporate clients. And my first real experiences of taking ownership of a case were through pro bono. Experiencing the client relationship, thinking through what the client actually needs and communicating effectively through that process all made me a much better lawyer. Perhaps most of all, I’ve met so many amazing people through pro bono work: the clients themselves, the passionate people in nonprofits and legal service organizations, and other lawyers dedicating their time and efforts to meaningful causes.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO AN ATTORNEY WHO IS CONSIDERING DOING PRO BONO FOR THE FIRST TIME? Just start somewhere. Whatever you are passionate about, pro bono work is needed there. Find a case underway and volunteer to jump in. Participate in a legal services clinic and commit to a case that needs you. Contact a legal nonprofit that works on an issue close to your heart and ask how you can help. Here in Dallas, the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program does an incredible job of finding and publicizing many different volunteer opportunities. So just start. Once you do, you won’t want to stop.

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT PRO BONO WORK? People sometimes mistakenly believe that pro bono work is not as exciting as some traditional commercial matters. But nothing could be further from the truth. Unlike many commercial disputes, pro bono matters often involve problems central to a client’s well-being, peace of mind, or fundamental rights. It’s challenging and rewarding to make a demonstrable difference in that person’s life.

DESCRIBE A MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE YOU’VE HAD IN PRO BONO. I took an appointment as appellate counsel for a prisoner bringing habeas claims for improper sentencing. I realized that the initial court filings, written by this man with no formal education, revealed a constitutionally invalid history. Getting to know him shattered many stereotypes I had. I remember calling him after oral argument, when we didn’t yet know the outcome, and even then, he was so grateful. His appreciation for us simply being there, and fighting for him, was remarkably humbling. When the court granted him habeas relief, I had the privilege of giving him the news. We both cried because his life was changed for the better. **TBJ**