

CHICAGO LAWYER®

Lifetime of service for others



Klawiter's dedication to pro bono work has inspired DLA Piper colleagues

DLA Piper's Anne Geraghty Helms and Rich Klawiter

By Melissa Rubalcaba Riske

While many firms encourage staff to make time for pro bono and volunteer projects in their community, DLA Piper partner Rich Klawiter says his firm takes a holistic view to these opportunities.

"(Pro bono is) what knits us together," said Klawiter, who is co-vice chair of the firm's real estate practice and one of the strongest threads in its Chicago office.

From his years of dedication to being known as a go-to person, other attorneys often seek him out for advice about pro bono opportunities.

"He's a real leader in our office," said Anne Geraghty Helms, DLA Piper's director and counsel for its U.S. pro bono programs. "He's a special person to have in in our Chicago office and our firm."

This spring Klawiter was honored with Legal Aid Chicago's 2022 Champion of Justice Award, a lifetime award for the years he's served on Legal Aid Chicago's board of directors — including two terms as board chairman.

Humbled by the honors, Klawiter prefers to speak about the firm and how stronger partnerships, such as the one fostered with Legal Aid Chicago, have enabled him and his colleagues to share their talents to make a difference in countless lives.

"We love developing those partnerships," Klawiter said. "We like working with other law firms where we can collectively do more."

RAISED BY THE CITY

While other attorneys sought pro bono and community service opportunities after establishing their careers, Klawiter forged his own path. He was fresh out of Stanford Law School when he accepted a position with Legal Aid Chicago. Klawiter said the desire to serve those in need comes from his family upbringing and the community that raised him — Hyde Park.

After four years at Legal Aid Chicago, he began thinking about his next step but decided that he wanted to work for a firm that would support his passion for serving others. He was interested in traveling to remote detention centers to counsel immigrant families, helping undocumented parents prepare guardianship petitions and even working with an inmate facing a death sentence.

"I knew service was pivotal and I'm so happy for the firm I found," Klawiter said. "I'd say everything that is important to me, I've been able to accomplish in my firm."

He serves on DLA Piper's North American Pro Bono Committee and

was selected as the recipient of the DLA Piper Global Pro Bono and Community Service Partner of the Year award in 2018.

DLA Piper is known for its robust interest in pro bono work, with several full-time lawyers who work on such cases, Helms said. As the firm recruits and interviews new hires, its culture of pro bono support is one of the top priorities, she added.

SOLIDIFYING ITS ROOTS

The firm's Chicago office includes 181 attorneys, and its real estate department has been involved in some of the city's notable projects including Lincoln Yards.

It's also been at the foundation of initiating real change in the ability to serve the underserved. This year marks the 12th anniversary of the establishment of a walk-in legal clinic in the Woodlawn neighborhood, in partnership with Legal Aid Chicago. Klawiter was instrumental in the development of the clinic, and even while serving as a board member for Legal Aid Chicago, he continued to volunteer at the clinic.

The Woodlawn Legal Clinic is an example of changes taking shape from how one traditionally has participated in pro bono work, said Melissa Picciola, director of pro bono community partnerships for Legal Aid Chicago. Rather than casting a line and hoping to find a volunteer, at Woodlawn Legal Clinic, DLA Piper associates assist with daily matters like helping people reinstate their benefits, advising on family law questions or handling tenant concerns.

"This means you can make a significant contribution as you volunteer for an hour and half," Picciola said.

Klawiter said the key for volunteers at the Woodlawn Legal Clinic is resourcefulness and being comfortable stepping out of one's comfort zone. He added: "You never know what you're going to get from month to month."

While she works with hundreds of volunteers and is juggling more than 20 different pro bono projects at any one moment, Picciola said there is something notable about the partnership between Legal Aid Chicago and DLA Piper. In the chaotic days at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, DLA Piper staff, including Helms, was instrumental in quickly moving the clinic to an online model in one month.

"When you think about the amount that DLA does and the breath in which they do it, it is unique," Picciola said.

And whether people visiting the clinic benefit from its legal services or discover that their issue isn't a legal matter, the ability to speak with a professional may feel empowering, Picciola said.

In July, DLA Piper was honored with the Legal Services Corporation's Pro Bono Service Award, recognizing the firm as a dedicated pro bono partner of Legal Aid Chicago for the past 15 years.

"They help us design a project that will work for all of us, that's what makes them a tremendous partner," Piccola said. "They are not just on the ground; they are leveling resources as a law firm that will help us to serve more people."

IN THE COURTROOM

DLA Piper staff, including Klawiter, was at the heart of the creation of an Eviction Brief Advice Desk in 2018. Today, attorneys from across the city volunteer their time to speak with those in eviction court. They answer procedural questions or help find a resolution between landlords and tenants.

"We had a long table in the hallway where attorneys can answer basic questions, like what to expect, or how to negotiate with a landlord,"

Helms said. "The need at eviction court is great, there are number of tenants who go unrepresented."

Aside from offering legal assistance, volunteers provided comfort to people facing incredibly stressful situations such as becoming homeless — often as they cope with other traumas such as a loss of a child, loss of a job, hospitalization or health problems, she said.

"In most cases you can reach an agreement without a court process, trial and without an eviction on one's record," Helms said. "It's a win."

Although DLA Piper piloted the Eviction Brief Advice Desk program, the firm later opened it to other firms.

"Explaining the circumstances to someone in plain English rather than legal speak is transformative," Klawiter said.

Picciola said that it's rare to see people make such a commitment to these programs and credits Klawiter.

"Rich developed the idea," she said. "He understood the needs of low-income tenants to have a voice and that is really unique."

Klawiter said the firm's support and resources for pro bono work creates the motivation for participation, whether it is in the Woodlawn Legal Clinic, the Eviction Brief Advice Desk or an avenue more in line with one's own interests.

"We love how people are inspired to do pro bono," Klawiter said.

melissa.riske.1@gmail.com

Photos by Rena Naltsas

