

CBS Corporation's Pro Bono Program: A Priority And An Asset

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*The Editor interviews **Louis J. Briskman**, Executive Vice President and General Counsel, and **Laurie Nicole Robinson**, Senior Vice President and Assistant General Counsel, CBS Corporation.*

Editor: Please describe CBS Corporation's philosophy on corporate social responsibility.

Briskman: Our company is strongly committed to serving the public throughout the many communities in which we operate, as well as the wider world arena. Currently, CBS is the number-one watched network, and it has millions of viewers. As a media company, we have the opportunity to use our assets to share important messages with the viewing audience. These assets include national television networks, local TV and radio stations, interactive and outdoor, and they are used to support community outreach; public service announcements, such as CBS Cares; and local drives and telethons, just to name a few. This public-service philosophy is part of our long and proud history.

Editor: What led you to start the CBS Law Department's Pro Bono Program?

Briskman: In 2004-2005, I served as the general counsel of Aetna. When I arrived, I was impressed with the fact that the legal department had an extraordinary existing pro bono program. The program was effective, and I witnessed firsthand the high level of commitment and participation of the attorneys in helping those who could not afford legal services. While there, I personally had an opportunity to work on a pro bono matter, which involved appearing in family court in Connecticut to represent my client. This experience reaffirmed to me the value and contributions of providing pro bono legal services.

At Aetna, we also partnered with the Pro Bono Institute, which is headquartered in Washington, DC and headed by Esther Lardent. The Institute has tirelessly helped to lead the way in engaging in-house legal departments and law firms to provide legal services to the poor, disadvantaged and other individuals or groups unable to secure legal assistance.

When I rejoined CBS Corporation in 2006, I wanted to incorporate the Aetna pro bono experience into the pro bono and corporate social responsibility initiatives already taking place at CBS. From that, the CBS Law Department Community Service and Pro Bono Initiatives Program was born in 2006, thus creating a better, more unified department that is aligned with the public service commitment of the CBS stations, network and businesses. At Aetna, our people made the difference, and that same distinguishing quality is here at CBS, as seen in our department's commitment to go the extra mile to help those in need.

Editor: In starting a program, how did you go about getting members of the CBS law department engaged in participating?

Briskman: When we launched, the program consisted of a committee of 17 law department staff members from the New York, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles offices. It also included our outside counsel, Lerman Senter LLP, in Washington, DC. In the early days, the team held monthly meetings via telephone to discuss pro bono and community service projects. From the start, our team was passionate about service, and those initial meetings enabled us to create what we have today – a robust program of service activities that really make a difference in our communities. We continue to convene monthly in order to plan and discuss upcoming projects.

Editor: Is your program mandatory, and does it allow for non-lawyers to get involved?

Robinson: Our program is not mandatory, but all members of our law department (lawyers, paralegals, assistants and engineers) are encouraged to contribute and to get involved in any way possible.

Editor: Does your program provide an opportunity for your staff members to engage on substantive areas that may not be within their core focus on the job?

Briskman: Yes, and this is a great benefit of our program. We begin by offering seminars and pro bono CLE programs around a project, providing an understanding and background about the issues that will be covered. These subjects are typically outside of the lawyers' practice areas, providing staff members with an opportunity to broaden their skills. Further, we encourage our lawyers to work together across the various legal business units (Showtime, Simon & Schuster, CBS Interactive, CBS Films, CBS Corporation, CBS Broadcasting, CBS Radio and CBS Outdoor), and pro bono service also allows our legal staff to work with individuals outside their practice groups. This interaction not only fosters collaboration but it also provides our lawyers with opportunities to learn new areas of law, which helps them to build their careers and grow substantively.

Editor: What are some of your law department's community service projects? Who are the beneficiaries of this program?

Robinson: Over the last five years, we have provided some of the following services: adopted elementary and high schools and exposed students to the practice of the law and to our media business; collected and donated food during the holiday season; served food in soup kitchens; cleaned up our communities through New York Cares Day and Hands on Pittsburgh Day; worked with the Special Olympics; raised money for Big Brothers Big Sisters Race for the Kids; and helped women and children who are victims of domestic violence.

Moreover, lawyers in our department have worked individually on causes that they are personally passionate about, such as Protection of Voters' Rights on Election Day, Aids Walk New York and K9 Lifesavers.

Our New York office has a close relationship with Safe Horizon, which is a nonprofit that helps women and children who are victims of domestic violence. We worked on painting and beautifying a shelter, and we collected and distributed metro cards to the mothers, children and teens, who often need transportation around New York City while staying at one of Safe Horizon's shelters. Additionally, each year for the Christmas party, we order pizza and collect toys and gift cards, which are distributed to the mothers and their children. This event is one of the highlights of the year.

Our Los Angeles office sponsors inner-city elementary students' participation in Earth Day, where students visit Redondo Beach to clean up, bird watch and study crawfish. For some students, it is their first visit to the beach.

Our Pittsburgh office hosts a clothing drive in the fall and donates business suits and coats to underprivileged women reentering the workforce in the Pittsburgh and surrounding areas.

Editor: What are some of your law department's pro bono projects, and do they tend to focus on specific types of issues or law?

Briskman: Our lawyers have participated in a variety of pro bono work, which primarily has focused on helping the less fortunate, victims of domestic violence and families in need of assistance. Some of our projects include Program for Offenders; Protection from Abuse; Custody Conciliation Hearings held in the Family Division of the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas; H.E.L.P. Homeless Legal Clinic; Divorce Proceedings for Victims of Domestic Violence; Legal Assistance to the Homeless; and Notarization of Adoption Paperwork.

To elaborate on some of these projects, in Los Angeles, our legal team volunteers at the Mesereau Free Legal Clinic. The clinic provides much-needed resources for legal information and legal assistance to residents of Los Angeles County who might not otherwise have ready access to such services. Legal advice and consultation are provided on issues ranging from consumer and civil rights to landlord-tenant issues.

Furthermore, our law department recently hosted a CLE program in partnership with Lawyers Serving Warriors, a pro bono project of the National Veterans Legal Services Program (NVLSP). Through the presentation, NVLSP attorneys advised CBS lawyers and staff in New York, Los Angeles and Pittsburgh on how to assist retired service members and how to help them apply for Combat Related Special Compensation for injuries incurred while serving in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The presentations were well attended in all offices, and our staff members have commenced working on cases.

Our Los Angeles and Pittsburgh offices have received pro bono awards for their efforts.

Editor: Has the law department spearheaded any projects that have resulted in greater participation by CBS Corporation?

Robinson: Two members of our law department, Laurie Lawrence and Clara Schwartz, led a company-wide effort to help a nonprofit organization – Operation Gratitude – which annually sends 100,000-plus care packages and personal letters of appreciation to U.S. service members deployed in hostile regions, to their children and to the wounded recuperating in transition units. The CBS law department and its business units work together to collect the letters and donate items, such as DVDs and supplies, all of which are mailed to the troops throughout the year and make a big difference in their lives.

Laurie Lawrence was also instrumental in driving participation on the biannual New York Cares Day in which volunteers come together to clean up New York City schools and parks. Through her energy and passion, she was able to galvanize 30 team members – within our law department and throughout our corporation – to participate in the last New York Cares Days, which took place in Harlem on a Saturday this past April.

Editor: Do you collaborate with outside law firms and nonprofits with your pro bono efforts?

Briskman: As I mentioned earlier, we partner with Lerman Senter (LS), which has recently supported the activities of four charitable groups and projects: Turning the Page, Active Minds, Martha’s Table and Gifts for the Homeless. LS attorneys and staff have donated hundreds of books to Turning the Page, which in turn sells the books and donates all proceeds to the DC public schools. LS continues to partner with Active Minds (www.activeminds.org), a nonprofit organization with chapters on 350 college campuses that provides information and resources about mental health issues, and the firm’s managing member, Steve Lerman, serves on the organization’s board of directors. LS conducted a cereal-and-soup collection drive for Martha’s Table, which provided pre-packaged foods to be distributed to needy families in Washington, DC, and the firm made a sizeable financial gift to Gifts for the Homeless in support of its “Banding Together” initiative, which raises funds to assist DC’s homeless.

In addition, we partner with Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP. In 2009, lawyers from CBS and Weil partnered to provide pro bono legal services in the form of preparing wills for elderly clients who were homebound, and in 2011, CBS and Weil again partnered with the Neighborhood Entrepreneur Law Project. This program enabled us to include our summer legal interns as well. Each team met with as many as four clients in Harlem at the Upper Manhattan Business Solutions Center and responded to clients’ various business law questions, ranging from important terms in commercial leases to the type of entity they should choose for their new business. Our team members who participated in this program thoroughly enjoyed it, and we will repeat the project this summer.

Our Pittsburgh Office also holds a board seat with the Pittsburgh Pro Bono Partnership, which organizes pro bono opportunities and signature projects for law firms and corporate legal departments in Pittsburgh.

Furthermore, CBS Law is a signatory to the Pro Bono Institute’s Corporate Pro Bono Challenge. We have participated in the Institute’s conferences and will participate in its regional convocation in June, which will be held in New York City.

Editor: Laurie, do you personally get involved?

Robinson: Yes, I participate in the annual New York Cares Day. I remember one of my first community service projects at CBS was with New York Cares. One Saturday, Lou, the volunteers and I painted a very long fence in a park in Harlem. We painted all day. The weather was nice, and it gave us all the opportunity to contribute to beautifying the park and the community.

I work one-on-one with our adopt-a-school – P.S. 20 The Anna Silver School – and I donate gifts to Safe Horizon and attend the annual Holiday Party. I also get involved with our pro bono projects, such as wills for the elderly and the Neighborhood Entrepreneur Project. I thoroughly enjoy it. It gives me a chance to work with my colleagues across our business units, and it is rewarding to see the difference that helping others can make.

Editor: How do you share information about your pro bono and community service projects within and outside of the legal department?

Robinson: The CBS law department posts announcements about upcoming projects on its own intranet site and publishes the *CBS Law Department Pro Bono and Community Service* newsletter twice a year. The newsletter serves as a tool to highlight our staff members and the projects they have worked on during the prior six months. Further, CBS Corporation distributes a publication called the *CBS Update* to all of our various business units, enabling us to share information with the entire company about our initiatives and invite those interested in getting involved to participate.

Editor: Has CBS Law been able to partner with any of its business units to spread the message about one of your projects?

Robinson: We have worked with our local stations group to create radio and television public service. For example, one of our attorneys, Lisa Tanzi, helped to coordinate the development of the public service announcement for Safe Horizon. CBS Law also helped to create a public service announcement for Operation Gratitude. These efforts have been very successful in raising awareness of these important causes.

Editor: Does CBS Law have any plans to expand its program internationally?

Robinson: We have several international team members located in Europe, Asia and South America. We plan to explore pro bono and community service opportunities with them this year.