

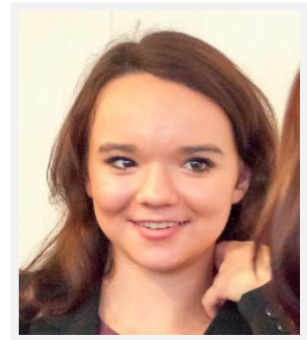
National Pro Bono Week

Birmingham Student Pro Bono Conference 2015

Thursday 5th November, Shoosmiths Solicitors

A Report by Sarah Hall

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Pro Bono: Little words, BIG impact! The diverse range of speakers from Birmingham universities and the legal profession made for a highly informative and engaging afternoon. I attended the conference with an appreciation of the impact of Pro Bono work, but upon leaving felt committed to ensuring Pro Bono services are, as Robert Bourns (Vice President of the Law Society) stressed, “sustained, long-term and accessible to the most vulnerable in society, representing shared values in the profession.”

Figures were given as to the approximate worth of pro bono activities equating to around £592 million annually. Whilst these figures highlight the importance of Pro Bono work, the conference left me feeling that a numerical value cannot be attached to the feeling of helping those who would otherwise be left disenfranchised and without access to justice, following drastic legal aid cuts. As students and practising professionals, we must recognise our responsibility to the community and apply legal knowledge for the benefit of those who may otherwise be excluded from the legal system.

Dedicating a few hours can have a life-time impact and could prevent someone needlessly facing injustice. Whilst to me, undertaking Pro Bono work is a way of holding out a hand of help to those who have been left out of arms reach of justice, I had little considered the benefits of it also to career progression. Pro Bono Associate, Stas Kuzmierkiewicz emphasised the importance not only to those committing to it and benefiting from it, but also to large firms especially in terms of corporate social responsibility.

It was interesting to hear from representatives of Shoosmiths and DLA Piper that involvement in many of their local and global pro bono projects may allow discovery of a secondary specialism, development of transferrable skills and provide opportunities to work locally in communities and internationally. And, as Robert pointed out provide an invaluable way to improve communication skills, which can then be translated into practice. It was highlighted by many speakers that Pro Bono is not a replacement to legal aid cuts, but is a way of sanding down its harsh edges. Hearing other students’ experiences of pro bono as adding a touch of reality to textbooks, was inspiring.

Upon leaving the conference I had an even stronger appreciation of the impact of pro bono work and left feeling compelled to ensure engagement in pro bono activities is promoted and reached by those whose arms have been left tied, out of reach of justice. Michael Bates from Birmingham Community Law Centre painted an interesting picture of Pro Bono bridging societal gaps. Between 2009-2010 approximately 470,000 legal aid cases were brought, but by the period of 2013-2014 only a mere 52,000 a stark depiction of the removal of access to justice and loss of legal representation to the most vulnerable and destitute. Pro Bono provides a way of asserting rights which could otherwise be lost. The closing panel debate stimulated interested discussion as to whether pro bono work should be mandatory.

The conference instilled in me that Pro Bono requires giving a little of oneself to save a lot for another. Pro bono: Two short words, HUGE global impact!

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