For the Good of the Order: *Profiles* in Pro Bono

Winter, 2012

Brad Cunningham

What firm/organization are you working with now?

I currently work for the Town of Lexington. I have been there for 9 ½ years. I am the Municipal Attorney for the Town of Lexington, and advise the Town Council on all legal aspects of the business of the municipality.

What kind of pro bono or volunteer work have you been involved in or are you doing now?

I do wills, living wills and powers of attorney pro bono for members of our police department and for members of the military. I also take some pro bono cases on a walk-in basis, averaging at least six pro bono cases per year since 2004.

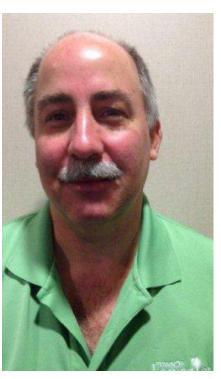
I have assisted in multiple SC Bar pro bono seminars and have conducted a couple of living will seminars at senior centers. In addition I volunteered on several occasions to speak to elementary school students on Career Day.

I am on the Board of the Richland/Lexington Chapter of the USC Alumni Association and the Lexington Youth Football League and am the Public Address announcer for the youth football league.

Other volunteer opportunies include: serving as president of the Kiwanis Club and providing pro bono legal work for my Homeowner's Association.

I volunteered with the Red Cross to assist victims of Hurricane Katrina. One of my jobs was to hook people up with their families after they had been split apart. On one occasion I was able to connect a man from the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans with his family which he had not seen in a couple of weeks. He said they would not put him on a rescue bus with his family, because men were going to a different place than women and children. His family left without him. When I located them, the rest of his family was in Missouri, and he was in South Carolina. They weren't even sure if he was alive. I was also able to connect him with one of his daughters serving in the Army in Germany.

I am on the Executive Board of the South Carolina Municipal Attorney's Association, serving as Secretary and I also serve as the Chairman of the Disaster Preparedness Committee of the International Municipal Lawyer's Association, helping to present seminars on Disaster Preparedness.



How has pro bono or volunteer work contributed to your career satisfaction?

I told my uncle, who is a priest, that I wanted to go into this profession because I wanted to help people. Very often, the most serious distress people find themselves in is also accompanied by financial problems. I find that the people who qualify for pro bono assistance are frequently the ones who need legal assistance the most. I find satisfaction that I can help people who in some instances otherwise might have had no help at all. This is truly gratifying.

What would you consider your biggest "victory," big or small, related to your pro bono service?

On behalf of my friend, Tony Harsey, I petitioned the State to have a bridge named after Tony's great great grand-father who was killed at the bridge site during the Civil War. There was a lot of research to do, and it became very interesting. I had to dig into history all the way back to the Revolutionary War to frame a solid basis for the request. It also involved looking at old property maps to prove ownership and history of the bridge. Fortunately, the State granted the request, and we had a ceremony recognizing it. Signage was placed at the site proclaiming the bridge to be "Harsey's Bridge." About thirty members of the Harsey Family turned out for the occasion. They were extremely excited and appreciative.



What are the main reasons why you would recommend that law students become involved in pro bono work?

Pro bono work is one of the best ways we (as a profession) give back to the community. I was once told lawyers don't do anything for the community. However, when I told this person how many hours of pro bono work members of the bar donated each year he was astonished. Pro Bono work is our gift to the community, and I think it is part of being a good citizen. It also helps to improve the public's perception of the profession, and shows people not all of us are in a billable hours contest. Along with pro bono work, I think involvement in a volunteer group is gratifying, and a great way for us to help our communities. Aside from all that, it is simply the right thing to do.

Brad presents a check to Town of Lexington Police officer Brandon Hassler (left) and Town of Lexington Chief of Police Terrence Green

What's the best piece of advice you could offer a law student? Is there anything you know now that you wish you had known in law school?

If you don't already have them, learn good time management skills. Set up schedules and stick to them. Above all, don't put off until tomorrow what you can get done today. Something else might come up tomorrow, and then you'll be overloaded. Also, find a stress outlet. When I was in law school, I had quit a job, we had a child born, and I was under immense pressure with mounting debt and other financial obligations. I had to work as close to full-time as possible, and still go to law school. I relaxed and unwound by taking my baby daughter swimming. The time was invaluable.

Can you briefly tell us about your most memorable case involving pro bono work?

An elderly lady came into my office very confused. She had received a letter and a phone call from a gentleman who claimed he had just bought her house. He offered to lease it to her if she wanted to continue to live there. She showed me the letter, and I recognized the man's name as a former customer of ours when I worked at a bank down on the coast. He made a living buying houses at tax sales and reselling them. Indeed, he had paid the back taxes on this property, and threatened to force the lady out if she did not begin paying rent. She had nowhere else to live as she had no relatives in the area. He even presented her with a Master's Deed. However, he neglected to tell her she had a one year redemption period to pay the taxes and penalties to keep her home. The client had to go borrow most of the money to pay her taxes and penalties, but with just a little effort I contacted him and told him she would be paying the taxes. Once she did, I told him never to contact her again. She was ecstatic, but had no money to pay since she had emptied her account and borrowed money just to pay the taxes. She was extremely thankful that I agreed to take the work pro bono, and still offered to pay me. I refused, and told her to consider this matter over, and to go home and relax.

What kind of perceptions, positive or negative, do you think that the bar as a whole has about attorneys who are actively involved in pro bono work?

Sometimes, I think we (lawyers as a profession) get so busy that during any time where we are not billing hours, legal work is the last thing we want to do. I know very few people who flat out deny wanting to do pro bono work. It's just a matter of time management, and making use of what you have.

Quick facts:

Education: U.S.C. - B.S. Finance, 1989; J.D., 2000.

Awards: 2011 South Carolina Pro Bono Lawyer of the Year

Family life: Married 19 years to Marcella. Daughter, Lauren, in middle school. (Wants to go to Carolina) My father, Bob Cunningham (USC Law Class of 1964) was a lawyer and served as my inspiration to go into a legal career.

Other interests/hobbies: Fishing, Golf and Radio Broadcasting. I have recently rediscovered a love for fishing, especially fly fishing. I love sports of all kind, especially USC sports. I have a 6 ¼ pound Rainbow Trout on the wall of my office. I also like old radios and have a 1937 Air Castle Wood Cabinet radio in my office.

If you weren't an attorney, what would be your profession?: After undergraduate school, I wanted to go to work for the FBI, but decided against it. I would either work for the FBI, or as a radio or television sportscaster.

When I take off my lawyer suit, I am a radio broadcaster, covering Lexington High School sports on Lexington's local radio station. I announce football, basketball and baseball.

This intervew was conducted by Allison Novak- Vice President of the Pro Bono Board
For the Good of The Order: Profiles in Pro Bono is a publication of the Board of the USC School of Law Pro Bono Program. The purpose is to highlight the activities of inspirational attorneys performing outstanding pro bono service.
Know someone who fits the bill? Email us at Robinspd@law.sc.edu