



Dan Grunfeld, Public Counsel President and CEO

[By Regan Morris]

One of the best ways to boost your practice and learn new skills is through pro bono work, according to Dan Grunfeld, President and CEO of Public Counsel, the largest pro bono law office in the United States. The former partner at McDermott, Will & Emery told LawCrossing how helping others is one of the best ways to help yourself. He should know-- he tried his first case pro bono as a Public Counsel volunteer.

Dan Grunfeld's mother jokes about a genetic mutation in the family that drives its members to become lawyers. Grunfeld's mother is an attorney. So were her father and her father's father. Grunfeld became an attorney too, and then he married an attorney.

"So there is something in the genes or in the water we drink," Grunfeld said.

Mr. Grunfeld, 45, said public service was also in his genes. Born in Israel but raised in Ethiopia before moving to Philadelphia, Mr. Grunfeld said he was taught to help others early in life by witnessing poverty in Africa and hearing his grandparent's stories of escaping Nazi persecution. His grandparents were German Jews who fled to what was then Palestine before World War II.

"I remember as a young kid having my grandparents insist upon any adult or even kids, that part of the responsibility is you give back," he said. "You've been given a lot. You have clothes and you are not hungry and you do well in school." Mr. Grunfeld was told he had a responsibility to help those less fortunate get a fair shot at success.

"That's partly what Public Counsel is all about," he said. "The whole idea of Public Counsel is it's not about anybody becoming a Mother Teresa. This is not about every volunteer dedicating every moment of their lives to social justice. The idea is that if everybody just does a little, collectively we do a lot."

Mr. Grunfeld, who has been the head of the pro bono firm for seven years, said the organization now has more than 50 fulltime staff and 3,200 volunteers, 1,900 of those are attorneys. That's a huge leap from Public Counsel's humble beginnings in 1970 with one attorney and one assistant.

Mr. Grunfeld urges young attorneys to volunteer and said aside from the emotional satisfaction of helping the less fortunate, pro bono work is often the easiest way for attorneys to branch into different areas of law.

Mr. Grunfeld started at McDermott during the summer after his second year of law school at Cornell and joined the firm full time after graduating. He built a general practice as a litigator, but his first trial was not for McDermott; he ended up in court trying a pro bono case for Public Counsel.

"Even when I was in private practice, both as an associate and as a partner, I always did a lot of pro bono. It was just emotionally satisfying, and I picked up a lot of my skills as a litigator," he said. "Coming up, it was a gateway for me to develop my skills. And when I became partner, I always encouraged the associates with whom I worked to do pro bono and do volunteer work including for Public Counsel but for other organizations as well."

The best part of his job now, he said, is the day-to-day variety and never knowing what will happen.

"I know it sounds like a cliché, but I really and truly believe that it is a privilege to have the job that I have," he said. "It's a job where you get to influence for the good the lives of thousands upon thousands of people, and you see people at their best. You see the volunteers who commit thousands and thousands of hours to help people who have no other place to go. And you see the clients--the abused woman, the homeless kid trying to get his life back together, the struggling nonprofit who, despite all odds, are doing magnificent work in the community. So to me it's very inspiring."

He still supervises some cases and negotiates settlements, and he spends time lobbying public officials to change policies which hurt the poor. Fundraising and writing opinion essays for newspapers are also parts of the job.

"So it's the variety and the fact that you're really doing cutting-edge law that makes this job special," he said. "The other thing that makes it special is just the quality of people (who work at Public Counsel). It is people who have many, many options as to what they want and can do with their lives, and they choose to, at great personal and financial sacrifice, to come work here because it gives them emotional satisfaction because they believe in this notion of people working together to help people who desperately need assistance."

Los Angeles-based Public Counsel is involved with numerous organizations and



causes, helping the homeless and foster children. The Adoption Project helps foster children become members of families.

"There are people that come in one day a week; there are people that will handle cases for years on end. There are people who commit 10 hours or 12 hours a year. And even that makes a difference," Mr. Grunfeld said. "Twelve or 15 hours toward the Adoption Project will make a kid in foster care get adopted. It's an amazing, wonderful example of what can be done when people of goodwill in government and private industry and the nonprofit sector get together."

Mr. Grunfeld said attorneys should listen to complaints and criticism about the legal

profession but not allow the one-sided view of many lawyer jokes to destroy the profession's history. Attorneys, he said, should be proud of the 400-year history of the profession in the Western world and fight against cynicism and remind people that lawyers have been doing pro bono work since the 1800s.

"The practical advice for young lawyers, part of what they need to think about is skill development, and one of the easiest ways to pick up a skill that you would otherwise not have is to do pro bono work," he said. "That's how I learned to take a deposition, and that's how I learned to examine a witness. The reality is you are able to do things for pro bono clients faster that you would be

for paying clients. So from a practical point of view, doing volunteer pro bono work is something that I would recommend to young attorneys and young professionals generally."

Mr. Grunfeld, who is returning to Africa this month for the first time since he was a boy and plans to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro with his 13-year-old son over the holidays, said it's inspiring watching attorneys volunteer their time and learn new skills.

"You see some of the accomplishments of what young lawyers are able to do when they volunteer, and it is a tremendous testament to both them and to the legal profession," he said.