

Strategies

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Four Years Post-Katrina, LMA Members Come to the Aid of The Big Easy

by Norm Rubenstein & Elonide C. Semmes



You don't have to hail from New Orleans to feel a special connection to the Big Easy.

For some people, the connection starts with the food – food so indescribably delicious that one seafood-stuffed eggplant or bread pudding soufflé and you're addicted. For others, it may begin with a trip to Jazzfest or a vacation foray to Mardi Gras. But regardless of how the infatuation starts, it's incurable. So when Hurricane Katrina did in 2005 what so many of her predecessors had threatened but failed to do—challenged New Orleans' vitality and viability—it served as a call to action for the “extended N'awlins Diaspora.”

Semmes: My husband and I both have family members in New Orleans, so we feel a special connection to the city. We spend a chunk of time in Louisiana every year and when Katrina hit, we were looking for our own place there. To say that Katrina changed the lives of everyone we know in New Orleans doesn't come close to describing how personally we reacted to the storm.

Rubenstein: My parents are New Orleanians who were in their 80s when they lost their home to Katrina. Although I moved east decades ago, I visit New Orleans many times a year, and after Katrina, I made frequent trips to survey the virtual demolition site their home had become. I was frustrated with how badly government at all levels had failed all

Louisianans, and increasingly annoyed with myself for failing to make a significant contribution to the “ReNew Orleans” movement.

Semmes: I felt the same way, and so Norm and I considered it providential when LMA connected us with The Pro Bono Project. The project is a New Orleans-based 501(c)(3) that, for the past 23 years, has worked with volunteers from the private bar to provide high-quality civil legal services to citizens living below the poverty line in a six-parish area surrounding New Orleans.

Rubenstein: One of its volunteers had the idea of contacting LMA in hopes of gaining visibility among law firms outside of Louisiana. While the project has done extraordinary work since 1986, its mission intensified and evolved in the wake of Katrina. The nature of the services with which its clients sought help also reflected the abject chaos into which New Orleanians were thrown post-hurricane.

Semmes: Joanna Broussard, a Chicagoan who helps The Pro Bono Project with marketing, fundraising and media relations, reached out to LMA. That's how we started down a path that led us to Rachel Piercey, who has served as the project's executive director since its inception, and Mark Surprenant, managing

partner of Adams & Reese's New Orleans office and former chair of the Pro Bono Project board.

Rubenstein: Sparked by the enthusiasm of so many of those dedicated to the project, it wasn't long before Elonide and I began proselytizing about its good works to others, many of whom were eager to become involved. Shortly before the end of 2008, I was appointed to the project's board and asked to chair its Resource Development Committee, which oversees fundraising and marketing. Within minutes, I was joined on my committee by Elonide and other LMA friends and colleagues.

Semmes: So how has our involvement benefited the project? Resource Development Committee members contribute our time, our creativity and even our money on a regular basis. Soon, the Pro Bono Project will sport a new corporate identity, which, in turn, will make its way onto a new Web site. Thanks to Michelle Egan, its board has received fundraising training, and we also have queued up generous counsel from our friends at Baker Robbins on a host of technological questions.

Rubenstein: And starting in July, Adams & Reese is scheduled to be the first New Orleans firm to pioneer "Marketing in a Downturn Economy," a specially designed program that Elonide, Ann Wallace and I have developed to deliver to the firm's lawyers in exchange for them making a donation to the project. It is our hope that the program will generate good

buzz and that other firms will ask us to present it to their lawyers in exchange for similar gifts.

Semmes: And us? What does our involvement with the Pro Bono Project mean to us? It reminds us of the rewards of practicing what we preach. For years, as legal markers and consultants, we have told our clients that there are many reasons to do pro bono work above and beyond the ABA Challenge and similar institutional commitments. We've opined that getting out into the cities where we live and work is good for networking, relationship-building and visibility at the same time that it fulfills an obligation we all share to contribute to our communities.

Rubenstein: What we had forgotten is that, more than anything, it is endlessly satisfying to work side by side with people who share our passions. Every time a Pro Bono Project lawyer, and therefore, the project itself, helps a New Orleanian come home, literally and metaphorically, it is a step towards the restoration of one our nation's great treasures.

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Want to participate? I am heading down to New Orleans approximately once a month to work with the Pro Bono Project and to soak up a little Cajun cuisine at the same time. If you decide to come along, Elonide and I will trade your time and effort for one of the best meals you'll ever have!
— Norm Rubenstein