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Why I'm passionate about the Illinois Bar Foundation

I joined the Illinois Bar Foundation's board of directors in 2008. There were essentially two reasons. First, Mark D. Hassakis pushed me to do it.

Mark can make oral surgery sound fun. Second, I knew the IBF threw a fantastic party every fall. That's it — no altruistic motive, no thoughts that I could make a difference in anyone's life — just guilt and fun.

My first IBF assignment was the grants committee. As a member of the committee, I learned that the money the IBF raised was directed toward legal aid groups which provide legal assistance to Illinois residents that cannot afford to hire a lawyer.

The grants committee screens applications, conducts site visits and meets the staff of the applicants.

The primary focus of my new assignment was to determine whether the applicants were worthy of our donors' money. Armed with an interest in protecting the donors' money and an ignorance of the battles that legal aid groups face, I headed off to my first site visit.

I ended up in the offices of the Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers (CLAIM). I learned that the executive director had not paid herself regularly. The offices were packed with people and files, all related to providing legal services and advocacy for the benefit of families of imprisoned mothers.

As I listened, I learned how the work being done at CLAIM was reducing the incarceration rates of women and girls. I came to understand the importance of providing a voice and support for both incarcerated women and their children.

I realized that few cared about this important issue, but the woman sitting across from me had dedicated her legal career to helping maintain the bond between mothers and their children.

Seeing the passion, the fiscal

responsibility and priorities of the staff, I left that site visit certain that CLAIM was a good fit for our donors' money. As I walked away from CLAIM's office, it occurred to me that most lawyers blessed with the experience I just had, would be proud to financially support CLAIM.

The fact is, the site visit was my blessing, because I got to see up-close a lawyer doing the right thing for the right reason — one whose mission was making a real difference in folks' lives. I was hooked.

Other visits to prospective grantees followed, and I quickly learned that dedication of this magnitude was typical. Almost every nonprofit which provides legal aid is run by a lawyer who is willing to forego a regular salary if necessary. Their focus is to help the less fortunate and cover the organization's expenses. If they have enough left over, they pay themselves.

Cliff Nellis, founder of the Lawndale Christian Legal Center, is one of those lawyers. After graduating from the University of Chicago Law School and clerking for a federal judge, Cliff bypassed the larger law firms and formed an organization to provide legal services to juveniles in one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods.

My site visit to his offices enhanced not only my decision to recommend funding, it made me a better person. Over the years, I have watched the center expand, serving more youth by adding a second full-time lawyer, trained volunteers and developing a committed board of directors.

Some of these lawyers work a second job to keep their legal aid organizations going. Dennis A. Kass, a high school teacher and lawyer, realized his students often had legal problems and issues but didn't know where to turn for help. Dennis founded the Chicago Law and Education Foundation, an after-school legal clinic for students and their families.

When most students and teachers are leaving for the day, Dennis starts his legal work

BY SHAWN S. KASSERMAN

Shawn S. Kasserman, a founding member of the personal-injury law firm of Tomasik, Kotin, Kasserman LLC, is president of the Illinois Bar Foundation, the charitable arm of the Illinois State Bar Association.

providing pro bono legal services in a tiny room conveniently located inside the school.

Each year, the Illinois Bar Foundation provides Access to Justice Grants to 20 to 30 organizations across Illinois like the ones above, in amounts ranging from \$5,000 to \$15,000. While grant-making is the primary focus of our work, it's not all the IBF does.

The Warren Lupel Lawyers Care Fund provides financial aid to lawyers and their families who've fallen on hard times. This assistance helps them maintain a modest but reasonable standard of living. Typically, the recipient has had a major medical or mental health crisis and depleted their savings. Their health issues have prevented them from earning an income. IBF funding enables recipients to stay in their homes as well as pay for everyday expenses such as groceries and medications.

The IBF's third initiative is the Post-Graduate Legal Fellowships program. We partner with three law schools to place recent graduates in the schools' legal aid clinics. The goal of the fellowships is to add more lawyers to the legal aid field while helping young lawyers hone their skills.

In the first two years of the program, IBF partnered with Northern Illinois University College of Law, Loyola University Chicago School of Law and University of Illinois College of Law to share the cost of three fellows. Three fellows completed their year of service, two are in the legal aid field and one is in the Army Judge Advocate General's Corps. Three new fellows have just begun their fellowships.

Our fourth program is the

Illinois Justice Corps. Launched as a pilot project in Chicago in 2009, the program was expanded in 2012. The program initially provided assistance at the Daley Center and court facilities in Markham and Bloomington.

In June 2014, the IBF began administering the expansion into additional court facilities around the state including Rockford, Waukegan, Kankakee, Champaign, Galesburg and Edwardsville.

Support for the foundation starts early for some lawyers. The ISBA's Young Lawyers Division raises funds which the foundation distributes to nonprofits whose services relate to the law and children. In fiscal 2014 alone, the division provided more than \$33,500 in grants to nine organizations, including four Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) programs.

A personal mission during my year as IBF president is to highlight the need for legal aid funding. In 2014-15, the IBF invested almost \$770,000 to enhance access to justice and to assist lawyers and their families in need. While significant, it isn't enough to meet the demand.

I believe that most Illinois lawyers would gladly engage in pro bono work or help fund legal aid organizations if they could feel and see the depth of the problem as well as the passion of the lawyers working to solve the problem.

The IBF does the groundwork of screening these organizations so that the money donated gets to the right organizations for the right reasons.

You can trust our investigation and site visits. If you want to join us on a site visit, I invite you to contact me directly. If all lawyers understood the important work that these not-for-profit organizations are doing to provide access to justice, they would be hard pressed not to support the IBF.

Awareness of the need is the critical first step. Once you are aware, you will get involved. I am living proof.