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Program opens people's eyes to low-income world

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In a downtown church basement Wednesday, Benjamin C. Weinberg lived a simulated reality that would give anybody a headache.

The SNR Denton pro bono partner played the role of a boyfriend who lived in a homeless shelter with his girlfriend and her child. He supported the family on a minimum wage job in which his paychecks get garnished to pay support for a child he fathered in high school.

Lacking a bank account, he cashed his checks at a currency exchange — where he owed money due to a loan secured through his car title. He had possessions to sell, but the pawn shop only paid a fraction of the items' value.

"I'm a former legal aid lawyer, had plenty of clients and continue to have very low-income clients," Weinberg said. "But we still see them through our lens. ... When we represent large corporate clients, those clients want us to understand how they see the world. So this was an incredibly good way of helping us understand that for our pro bono clients."

As part of Pro Bono Week, The Chicago Bar Association hosted a training session to help lawyers understand the daily hardships that low-income clients face. The "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" program included a month of simulated living, divided into four 15-minute sessions.

"As lawyers, we are good at spotting legal issues," said Tiela Chalmers, a San Francisco-based legal consultant who moderated the program.

"But to really understand the whole spectrum of someone's experience and how it will lead them to make choices that we don't understand or don't approve of, you learn it in a different way when you experience it yourself."

About 50 lawyers and law students attended the event that turned the St. Peter's Church basement into a simulation of a town that featured a grocery store, bank, currency exchange, police depart-



Marina Makropoulos

Louis R. Schroeder of Fidelity National Law Group (right) carried his "children" to the "pawn shop" tended by Danielle E. Hirsch of The Chicago Bar Foundation (left) during their participation in The Chicago Bar Association's "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" program on Wednesday as part of Pro Bono Week.

ment, utility company, pawn shop, school, daycare center and legal aid organization.

Assigned to teams, attendees played families that had children and either one or two parents.

When the groups opened their packets to learn their simulated reality, some noticed they didn't have much, if any, money. If they had a job, they would get more money at work.

They needed public transit passes to travel. And if they arrived late to work because they waited in long lines for various services, they lost their job.

This happened while parents also needed to take children to school or daycare.

And Chalmers periodically blew a whistle to announce a day-changing event, such as a lice outbreak at school that required children to be picked up early. Families could also face other factors such as a domestic violence incident that required the victim to decide whether to

kick the family bread-winner out of the home.

Carrie J. Di Santo, vice president and global chief compliance officer at Aon Corp., played an unemployed single mother of two teenagers. She started the simulation with \$10.

"My family had real struggles. I was only able to provide enough food for two of the four weeks. I did keep the utilities on. It was an incredibly stressful situation. It was hard to contemplate having any kind of meaningful parental relationships with the kids when you're really just trying to survive," Di Santo said.

Di Santo's daughter was played by Megan Burke, a third-year student at The John Marshall Law School.

As an intern at the Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing, Burke works with clients who face eviction. The session reminded her to be more patient with them.

“It gave me greater insight into the kinds of issues that they face on a day-to-day basis after or before they come meet with me. It just gave me a greater appreciation for what they have to deal with,” Burke said.

The lessons weren’t lost on the volunteers who played the town staff.

Julie LaEace, pro bono manager at Kirkland & Ellis LLP, played the police officer who needed to watch for child neglect, help evicted tenants and look for

participants who were instructed to commit crimes.

“I got to the point where I couldn’t even deal with some of the smaller things because I was so busy trying to solve the bigger issues,” LaEace said.

“It was a really sobering experience. People really felt stressed and they felt the emotional distress of the situation even though we all knew it was a simulation.”

Robert A. Graves, executive director of The Chicago Bar Foundation, said most

CLE events aren’t as interactive as this one.

“While you can’t truly simulate what it would be like to go through all this in real life, it gives enough of a flavor that everybody is going to be more empathetic and more aware of some of the challenges that clients are facing beyond the legal problem they may be coming to you with,” Graves said.

“And that was the real value of it for everybody.”