

The alpha and omega of pro bono



By Margaret Benson
Chicago Volunteer Legal Services

As a spry 82-year-old retired attorney, Leo Feldman views his legal career through a rearview mirror.

Law student Travis Moore, about 50 years Leo's junior, continues to map out his plans for the profession.

So what do these two men, at opposite ends of the legal experience spectrum, have in common?

They both donate free legal services to low-income clients.

Although one makes use of his experience while the other acquires it, Leo and Travis contribute their time, talent and energy to help clients navigate the legal system. Meet the alpha and the omega of pro bono.

Travis always wanted to be a legal services attorney and pro bono is the first step on that path.

A native of Kansas City, Mo., he graduated from North Park University with a major in philosophy and a certificate in nonprofit management.

He decided to go to law school because he saw the power of the law. He wants to use that power to improve people's lives, to make a difference. After he graduates from The John Marshall Law School in 2013, he said he hopes to find a job, either as a legal aid attorney or in a related, legal service-oriented field. His long-term goal involves running a legal services organization.

Leo, on the other hand, chose a more traditional path to his pro bono work. After graduating from the University of Chicago Law School in 1954, he went to work for Teller, Levit & Silvertrust a commercial litigation firm.

At the time, he said, law jobs were scarce and he was happy to get the offer. Ultimately, economic and practical considerations, including

a wife and children to support, steered his career and Teller Levit, a good place to work with good people, remained his professional home until he retired 10 years ago. Still, he'd always dreamed of being a civil rights or a labor lawyer.

Leo enjoyed retirement — for a while. Then he got bored.

Looking around for something meaningful to do, he realized that he enjoyed practicing law, and he was good at it. He also realized that he wanted to repay the legal profession for the comfortable life that it had given him and his family for many years.

Finally, why teach an old dog new tricks? Leo knew how to practice law, so that's that he would do.

Not for money.

Been there, done that. He had the luxury of donating his services for free. He could spend as much or as little time as he wanted, doing good for other people.

So now Leo volunteers at Chicago Volunteer Legal Services two days a week, interviewing and counseling clients.

He handles a few cases too, from time to time. He likes the work.

Having seen how desperate people are when confronted with a legal problem that he knows an attorney can fix, he feels the power and the peace that he brings to people. Leo enjoys being able to advise, counsel, comfort and empower.

Leo is also learning a few new areas of law. This old dog is, in fact, learning a new trick or two.

Forty-plus years of practicing law didn't prepare him for some of the issues low-income clients face.

After conducting in-depth interviews with clients facing foreclosure and people who

need to be appointed guardian for elderly, ill relatives, after meeting with desperate people facing any variety of legal problems and after reading training materials and consulting with staff attorneys, Leo is ready to once again appear in court, this time pro bono. Everything old is new again.

On the other hand, as far as Travis is concerned, everything new is new again.

Travis considers fair housing and economic disparity to be seminal issues that he intends to pursue throughout his career.

As a result, he volunteers with the Circuit Court of Cook County Mortgage Foreclosure Mediation Program, working with clients to explain the foreclosure and mediation processes to make sure that they understand what they need to do.

He also works with staff attorneys, drafting pleadings and court orders and helping with briefs. Once he completes his second year of law school, he'll be eligible to practice under Supreme Court Rule 711. That means he'll be able to represent clients in court, with supervision, and, at that point, Travis will bring his passion for social justice and the power of the law into the courtroom on behalf of his clients.

Alpha and omega. Yin and yang. Leo Feldman and Travis Moore.

These two men are representative ends of the spectrum of pro bono attorneys that provide access to justice for low-income people throughout the Chicago region. Follow their examples and do pro bono. ■

mcb@cvs.org