

CHICAGO LAWYER®

PRO BONO FOCUS



A PERSONAL TOUCH

Latham & Watkins associate Sarah Barr assists the community with her GAL pro bono work

BY JOHN MCNALLY

As a member of Latham & Watkins' real estate practice, associate Sarah Barr's daily work is mostly transactional. In her pro bono work for guardian ad litem cases, she gets to work on personal cases involving children and families.

"One of the great things about GAL work is that it doesn't involve a specific area of substantive expertise," Barr said. "It's more of being familiar with the court system and how to review case law."

Barr believes she has worked on nearly 20 guardian ad litem cases during her volunteer time with one current active case.

"I try to take one or two a year," she said. "Some of cases are pretty quick and they are done in about four months. Then you can have other cases that can last (longer). Six years is our longest one."

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Chicago Lawyer: How did you come to taking on pro bono guardian ad litem cases?

Sarah Barr: Latham & Watkins does a really great job at bringing in all types of pro bono opportunities for people to select from. Latham encourages everyone to do pro bono work that is meaningful to us. I had a lot of options to choose from which was quite a luxury. I wanted to do something good for the Chicago community and also ideally represent kids. This fit the bill perfectly.

CL: Is there anyone at CVLS [Chicago Volunteer Legal Services] specifically that helps you out a lot on these cases?

SB: Our main contact there is Rebekah Rashidfarokhi and she's a wonderful resource for us. We email and call her all the time. We go to her with our tricky issues when we don't know what to do. We try to run the cases and take as much of the burden off CVLS as possible.

They are trying to do the most for the community with the resources they have. We try to be self-contained and we reach out to them for difficult matters such as getting a professional if the child should need counseling.

CL: How are you helping mentor others on pro bono guardian ad litem cases?

SB: What I like to tell them is that these cases can get quite challenging. Oftentimes, the adult parties become very upset and contentious. It is part of our job to understand their concerns and it can become easy to get wrapped up in the disputes among the adults. The No. 1 piece of advice I

give them is 'always think about everything through the child's perspective.' That is extremely clarifying.

Also, be very patient with the parties involved in these cases. Let them vent, hear them out and give them a platform. This process is very upsetting and stressful for everyone and so, oftentimes, if you give them an opportunity to feel heard then it becomes a lot easier to come to a sensible outcome that they agree to.

Ultimately, you often have parties over guardianship of a child, who in a perfect world would all be a part of that child's life. You really want them to get along for the benefit of the child. It can be wonderful if you can build consensus and have everyone rally around that.

CL: How do guardian ad litem cases with newborns differ from toddlers, preteens and teenagers?

SB: What we're really doing is making sure the baby looks healthy and well-cared for and clean. Then we're watching for how the baby interacts with whomever brings it in, but we like to have the child come in with both parties disputing guardianship. That's all we can really do there.

With kids who can talk, the issue is that they will often say whatever they think you want to hear. Even though they can tell you what they want it can be difficult. One day they can say they want to go with one party and the next day they'll say the opposite. It can be tough to figure what the child wants.

This is stressful for the kids too. They just want peace to be restored.

CL: What advice would you give to a young lawyer thinking about taking a pro bono case?

SB: The work is usually at a different pace than client-billable work, meaning you always can do it because it's less fire drill-orientated work. You can always fit it in and it's a great way to make connections within and outside your firm.

And, of course, it's extremely rewarding. You feel like you're helping the mission on CVLS and helping to make a difference in your own community. When friends ask you what type of work you do, this is the type you can actually talk about. Most of the other work you do is under confidentially restrictions. This is a great thing to tell your mom about. **CL**

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