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## Opportunities abound: Embrace non-traditional pro bono

*Jeffrey Chang* ·

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When you hear the phrase “pro bono,” what comes to mind? Work you want to do, but just don’t have time for because of your other commitments or because you want some time free from “thinking like a lawyer?” Don’t let your pro bono efforts stall just because you can’t find the time to take on a big pro bono case or because you’d rather not think like a lawyer all the time. Instead, embrace “non-traditional” pro bono.

What do I mean? The phrase is too broad to define (which is a good thing), but I can provide some recent examples.

### Return to your roots

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One way to get involved in non-traditional pro bono is to return to your roots or explore your other passions. I grew up wanting to be an engineer. I went to school to get my electrical engineering degree and eventually to design and build things. My favorite class in high school was AP Chemistry. I constructed dozens of Lego sets (and deconstructed them so I could re-construct them later). I enjoy building Ikea furniture because it is essentially Legos for adults. I wanted to design and build things, but somehow found my way into the legal profession.

Recently, I “returned to my roots” and explored my passion for learning about how things work by volunteering as a judge at a Washington, D.C. public high school. I served alongside scientists, teachers, and Capitol Hill speechwriters, and we were tasked to judge high school chemistry projects. (While my favorite class in high school was AP chemistry, as mentioned above, I went on to study electrical engineering, so I still question my assignment to the chemistry experiments.)

By interacting with these high school students, we—societally-defined “successful people,” such as scientists, politicians, and lawyers—showed them that we cared about them and their achievements. I also benefited from judging the science fair projects, including learning about the water quality of rivers and lakes surrounding my neighborhood and which sports drinks have the most electrolytes, giving me the most bang for my buck. This brings me to my next two examples.

## Kill two birds with one stone

Pro bono often benefits both you and those you are serving. For example, when you [represent a pro se veteran](#) in an appeal to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, not only do you help that veteran, you get the opportunity to sharpen your oral argument skills. Embrace the same mantra for non-traditional pro bono.

[City Year](#) provides services to at-risk students in high poverty communities, especially those likely to drop out of school. One of my firm’s clients is very passionate about City Year’s mission. My firm learned about our client’s passion for serving at-risk students, so a group of us went with our client to an annual fundraiser. We invested our time and money into a cause cared for deeply by our client. Our client’s passions became our passions. Not only did we get to support the wonderful work at City Year, we strengthened our relationship with the client by aligning ourselves with the client’s passions and getting some face time with them.

Here’s another example. The annual [Lawyers Have Heart 5K Run](#) brings together runners and walkers to support the American Heart Association. I, along with two dozen others from my firm, joined our fellow legal professionals in the D.C. area to support the fight against

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heart disease and stroke. Not only did I get to support heart health in others, I ran and supported the health of my own heart.

## Change up your practice

This last example doesn't fall perfectly under the umbrella of non-traditional pro bono, but it is "non-traditional" in my personal practice. My intellectual property practice usually involves advocating for clients before the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and U.S. district courts. My practice does not often bring me to the U.S. Supreme Court. But that opportunity came recently.

We filed an amicus brief for the nonprofit [Industrial Designers Society of America](#) (IDSA), the largest and one of the oldest membership associations for industrial design professionals. IDSA wanted this brief to help the Supreme Court, in *Samsung v. Apple*, understand the importance of strong design patent laws and the role Section 289 (dealing with infringer's profits) plays in strengthening design patent laws. By helping IDSA write and file their amicus brief in the Supreme Court, I changed up my practice and reinvigorated my passion for the law.

Don't let your lack of time or desire to take off your "thinking like a lawyer" hat prevent you from getting involved in pro bono work. Opportunities for non-traditional pro bono work are everywhere.

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