

CHICAGO LAWYER®

PRO BONO FOCUS

Where the Heart Is

A Steptoe partner helps families keep their homes

BY ADRIANNA PITRELLI

Anthony G. Hopp, a partner at Steptoe & Johnson LLP, was eating dinner with his family one night when he realized how lucky he was to have a roof over his head and a warm meal on his table.

That's when he knew he wanted to help others, that's when he wanted to do pro bono work, especially for children. He wanted them to have a place to call home.

Since 2013, Hopp has volunteered with the Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing — an advocacy group and pro bono law firm that aims to keep their clients someplace warm and secure. Hopp said the satisfaction of knowing he can navigate the legal system for someone who is in need is extremely beneficial.

"My corporate clients don't usually hug me," Hopp said. "They do sometimes, but when you preserve a family's home, usually you get a hug. And that's great."

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Chicago Lawyer: What is your role with the Lawyers' Community for Better Housing?

Hopp: Essentially, my work has been eviction defense and trying to preserve housing for families. Mothers with children and fathers with children are often facing eviction and I help them.

I more recently got involved in a case involving a child who was in an apartment that was contaminated with lead. We had to deal with both getting him out of the apartment and getting him compensation for the damage that it cost him through the lead contamination.

CL: How did you get involved in this work?

Hopp: Our firm had pro bono opportunities and they were all worthy causes, but none of them really spoke to me. I then realized that I really needed to do something, I needed to use my skills to help someone, I needed to do some pro bono work. I just felt compelled that I needed to try to get involved. But I didn't know what to do.

And so it took a while for me to figure out where my real interests lie. At the time, I had young children growing up and when I was not traveling for work, I'd be home for dinner. And we'd say grace before dinner, and one of the things we would always thank God for is the roof over our heads.



PHOTO BY RENA NALTSAS

I live in the suburbs and have a nice house. It's nothing spectacular, but my children always knew where their home was and they could walk home from school and knew that their mom would be there and their father would come home from work and they had a home. And so I realized as I thought about that, that my real pro bono interest lay in housing, particularly housing for children. I wanted to try to preserve homes for people.

So around that time, a client invited me to an event for Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing, it just was sort of serendipity that as I was kind of going through this personal journey, I was invited to this event.

I met some of the lawyers' committee. Then again, I want to say it was in 2004, I essentially just walked in and told him I wanted to volunteer. They trained me as an eviction defense lawyer. And after that I probably picked up and have handled over the course of, in the last 15 years or so, probably several dozen eviction defense cases. And then more recently I've gotten involved in some more complicated stuff. I did handle a class-action form at one point on housing conditions.

CL: For other lawyers who want to get involved in their community, what piece of advice would you give them to seek out those opportunities?

Hopp: There are really two things. The first is just start. The hardest thing about pro bono is just getting started. It's almost like anything else. A lot of other things that you do in your life, you find are a lot easier once you just get started.

Find something that appeals to you and just start doing it. And the other thing is this process of discernment. I think everybody, at least everybody who's interested in pro bono work, has something that's important to them.

One of my partners in [Washington] D.C. is very, very involved in the fight against human trafficking, and it's a huge and very important issue. And it's something that she's very invested in and so she's involved in that.

There are asylum, there are immigration issues, there are any number of issues and you just need to sort of take that personal journey and decide what's important for you. And you can find an organization that needs your help.

There is absolutely no shortage of people who really, really need legal services and aren't getting them and, as a result, are not getting the results that they need, or the results that they deserve in order to, in my case, preserve a home for a family.

In other cases, preserve someone's liberty. It's out there, you need to take your own personal journey, and then just get going.

CL: What's the most beneficial part of doing this type of work?

Hopp: There's certainly a satisfaction to knowing that I'm using my legal skills to make a difference in the lives of people who really can't afford the services that lawyers would provide otherwise.

Because it's pro bono, by definition, we're helping people who are essentially indigent. And there are a lot of closed doors for people who are poor in Chicago and Illinois and elsewhere.

The courthouse door is really one of them. In theory, the courthouse is open for everybody and you can go in on your own and represent yourself and you're absolutely free to do that.

There's a practical matter though.

You will almost never get what you need out of the system unless you have a trained advocate to help you.

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