



Marina Makropoulos

Members of the West Cook Pro Bono Network meet at the Oak Park home of Donna Peel, who organized the group last year as a way to bring fellow lawyers-turned-stay-at-home mothers together to perform pro bono work. In the photo (from left to right) are Kristina Entner, Donna Peel, Sheila Pont, Sarah Arnold, Heather Vanderberg, Stojanka Zjalic and Jill Brady.

## Pro bono group gives balance to stay-at-home moms

By Bethany Krajelis  
Law Bulletin staff writer

When Donna Peel took a break from work to care for her children, she knew her love for the law wouldn't let her stay away too long.

Before becoming a stay-at-home mother to two children, Peel spent 11 years in the U.S. Department of Justice's antitrust division, a job she wanted since writing her personal statement for law school.

But, when the pressure of having a two-lawyer household and one child who needed medical attention became too much, Peel in 2003 took a break from the practice of law. Her husband, Drew G. A. Peel, worked at Kirkland & Ellis LLP at that time, but has since moved to Rachlis, Durham, Duff, Adler & Peel LLC.

Shortly after realizing her break wasn't going to be as temporary as she planned, Peel started looking for pro bono work. She quickly discovered that while there is a high demand for pro bono attorneys, the opportunities for stay-at-home-parents were slim.

The opportunities either conflicted with her children's schedules or were located in the city, the latter of which required her to pay about \$200 for a

babysitter and downtown parking.

"Everything seemed to be done during the hours where I was with my family even though I had a wealth of availability from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.," Peel said.

In an attempt to alleviate these difficulties, Peel created the West Cook Pro Bono Network last year. The group's first meeting was in February 2010.

Since then, the network has grown to about 28 active members and performed about 200 hours of pro bono work. Peel said there are nearly 50 people on an e-mail list, including several solo practitioners and attorneys in transition as well as at least one recent law school graduate who can't find employment.

While several of the network's members are not authorized to practice law, Illinois Supreme Court Rule 756(j) allows inactive and retired attorneys to handle pro bono matters under the supervision of the pro bono agencies.

Peel said the basic idea behind the network comes from Chicago Pro Bono Attorney Moms, a similar group that Jamie A. Hochman Herz formed a few months before Peel started her network.

The groups work under different models, but maintain the same goal of helping

stay-at-home or part-time working parents find pro bono opportunities.

Peel's group focuses on finding work in west suburban Cook County that gives the volunteer attorneys the chance to sharpen their skills and help others.

After forming the network, Peel first reached out to Michael G. Bergmann, executive director of the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI).

Bergmann said he regularly works with law firms and corporations to start or expand their pro bono efforts and occasionally assists individuals seeking pro bono opportunities.

He said it can be logistically difficult to work with attorneys on an individual basis, which is why groups like Chicago Pro Bono Attorney Moms and West Cook Pro Bono Network are so great.

"There is force in numbers," he said, explaining that pro bono agencies would prefer to train a group of attorneys rather than one at a time. "These groups are great and are certainly a helpful way to organize pro bono work and get the most bang for your buck, so to speak, for their members and the agencies."

Thomas C. Wendt, chief legal officer at  
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the Center for Disability and Elder Law (CDEL), worked with Peel's network on several projects in the past year and expects their relationship will continue to grow.

Given the high demand for pro bono attorneys, Wendt said the network's members provide a great help. He said CDEL attorneys went to the Oak Park area to train the network's members, who then help the center provide legal assistance to those in need.

Wendt said one of the main CEDL projects the network helped with involves its senior center initiative, which includes assisting seniors with their living wills and powers of attorney.

The network's members, he said, helped about 70 people through this initiative.

"It's a way for the attorneys to keep their skills sharp without having to get into something that is long-term," Wendt said. "It allows the attorneys to practice in a convenient way and it allows us to help more people."

Besides working with the CDEL, Peel said the network's members have participated in the Constitutional Rights Foundation "Courtroom to Classroom" project. Peel said these are two of the network's anchor projects. The network also recently started working with the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago on cases involving immigrant victims of domestic violence and plans to work with Lawyers for Better Housing in January to represent low-income tenants in eviction court.

Bergmann, of the Public Interest Law Initiative, said Peel's network is "a win for everyone involved."

The attorneys get to perform pro bono work on their schedules, the agencies get assistance and those in need receive free help.

He said one of the things that makes the network so unique is that it works under a model that requires two attorneys to handle each case.

That is also one of the reasons why the network has been able to retain its active members, said Kristina Entner.

Entner has been involved with the network since its formation and lives a block away from Peel in Oak Park.

Like Peel, Entner is part of a two-lawyer household with two children. Entner's husband, Edward F. Malone practices at Barack, Ferrazzano, Kirschbaum & Nagelberg LLP.

Prior to becoming a stay-at-home-mother, Entner worked at Jenner & Block. She handled litigation at that firm for about eight years before she said the schedule "got too insane."

Shortly after leaving the practice of law, Entner said she felt conflicted. She loved being with her children, but she no longer utilized the law degree she worked so hard to earn.

"You have these skills to offer and then all of a sudden, you have no way to offer them anymore," Entner said. "Having Donna put this network together was so incredible for me and other lawyers in the same position. It has been so rewarding."

Entner said she enjoys the network's model of requiring two attorneys on each case because she knows she won't let anyone down if an emergency comes up.

"It is so helpful to have that backup," she said. "I think it is that backup that makes it so anyone can participate in the network."

For more information about the West Cook Pro Bono Network, go to [west-cookprobono.com](http://west-cookprobono.com).

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