

NYSBA CITY BAR JUSTICE CENTER: Pro Bono Advising for Emerging Entrepreneurs Builds Businesses, Communities, and Attorney Engagement

By Akira Arroyo and Kurt M. Denk

As a nonprofit legal services provider that is “built for pro bono,” the City Bar Justice Center (CBJC) (<https://www.citybarjusticecenter.org/about-cbjc/our-story/>), an affiliate of the New York City Bar Association (<https://www.nycbar.org/>), leverages the time and expertise of volunteer attorneys to serve over 26,000 low-income New Yorkers each year. Integral to this engagement, but perhaps at times overlooked if pro bono is thought of as just “volunteering,” is pro bono advising’s capacity to help keep our communities and economy dynamic and diversified. As CBJC’s work with volunteer attorneys and emerging entrepreneurs attests, a pro bono spin on the increasingly ubiquitous goal of “doing well by doing good” is the belief that “doing good builds businesses”—including in areas like the arts, entertainment, and sports.



Since 2001, CBJC’s Neighborhood Entrepreneur Law Project (NELP) (<https://www.citybarjusticecenter.org/projects/neighborhood-entrepreneur-law-project/>) has provided low- to moderate-income micro-entrepreneurs with the legal services necessary to start their businesses on sound legal footing. With significant reliance on transactional and other attorneys who volunteer their time, NELP guides clients through incorporation and tax issues, contracts and agreements, commercial lease negotiations, and copyrights, trademarks, and patents. Volunteers also offer presentations and legal clinics at community-based organizations on issues of concern to micro-entrepreneurs. Two recent success stories demonstrate how attorney engagement in pro bono work has helped transform creative individuals’ passion for the arts, sports, and entertainment into dynamic enterprises that contribute to community transformation.

Success Story Example #1: Kidspire

Karen Domingo-Moran, a Queens mom with years of professional experience in architecture and design, saw opportunity in the absence of extracurricular arts programs at her children’s underfunded public school. She first volunteered to develop and teach in-school architecture workshops where students could explore their



creativity. Inspired by rave reviews from students, parents, and staff, Domingo-Moran eventually founded the now-thriving business **Kidspire**—the website of which proclaims its success at inspiring students “to stand at the intersection of their art, history, social studies, math, and science lessons, and develop new connections” (<http://www.kidspirenyc.com/>).

No business effortlessly transforms from idea to existence, and no less Kidspire. Money was not the only issue. Even after securing grants from the Queens Council on the Arts and the Queens Economic Development Corporation’s StartUP! Business Plan Competition, Domingo-Moran found herself in need of what turned out to be cost-prohibitive legal expertise addressing entity formation; tax, insurance, and liability concerns; commercial leasing; and other issues.

Beginning in 2014, Domingo-Moran turned to NELP, attending five of its small business legal clinics to obtain no-cost advice from volunteer attorneys. She credits that assistance with not only making her business possible, but freeing her up to focus on expanding its potential for impact in the community. Reflecting on her experience, Domingo-Moran shared her gratitude “that a service like this exists” in New York City, and also for the individual attorneys she worked with, who she believes gave her confidence in negotiating fair terms and establishing agreements between Kidspire and various public schools and other entities.

Kidspire is a proven success, having served multiple schools and over 3,000 children in just a handful of years. Kidspire participants have learned to push creative boundaries through hands-on projects that, thanks to Kidspire’s curriculum, integrate their learning with their teachers’ lesson plans so that the students build on their knowledge across disciplines and are more likely to develop interests in science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) fields. In this sense, Domingo-Moran’s enterprise not only expands children’s horizons in art and other areas today, but helps them build the skills by which they will contribute to and transform our communities in the future.

Success Story Example #2: EAT SOCCER

The story of Qiana Martin, a professional athlete turned social entrepreneur, and her enterprise, EAT SOCCER, offers similar inspiration.

Martin was looking to start a multimedia digital channel targeting young sports fans interested in positive sports culture, lifestyle tips, and relevant sports products when she attended a NELP legal clinic in October 2016. Like Domingo-Moran, she sought general guidance on forming a business entity and a better understanding of how to protect intellectual property rights and draft agreements with potential sponsors and partners. Eventually relying on both NELP and an expanding team of volunteer corporate attorneys who took on her matter for extended representation, Martin has described “working tirelessly to surround herself with a team of advisors” who, she knew, would “share in her enthusiasm and passion for the sport of soccer.” (If they had not shared that passion before working with her, she believes they certainly do now!)

Consistent with that model of engagement, EAT SOCCER uses “a team of soccer creatives” to “help soccer fans satisfy their cravings for the sport” by providing, each week, a globally sourced digest of “interesting stories, intriguing people and expert tips to help our brands and community stay in the game.”

(<https://www.eatsoccer.com/>) In this sense, Martin’s initiative “isn’t just a website set up by a soccer enthusiast” with the help of pro bono attorneys. Rather, it is part of a series of platforms by which Martin promotes “the idea that people should embrace the ‘universal language of soccer’”—a vision, first shared in a 2011 TedX Talk by that name, rooted in a belief that “the sport can serve as a vehicle for people of all backgrounds in the U.S. to become global citizens.” Martin’s belief in this respect rests on the premise “that soccer’s dominance as the world’s favorite sport is fueled by the diverse voices, perspectives and experiences of those that play, coach and support the game.” At the heart of EAT SOCCER’s mission is the conviction “that when people share a common bond”—here, a focused passion for soccer—“it can serve as a starting point from which they can learn about and appreciate each other’s differences.”

Positive Effect of Doing Pro Bono

The arts, sports, and entertainment success stories that Kidspire and EAT SOCCER represent ultimately turn

on the vision and grit of the women who founded these enterprises. Yet they also should serve as inspiration to lawyers to consider both the impact that transactional pro bono work can have on the individual clients served, and the capacity of that work to transform communities and the economies they support.

Valerie Farkas, senior counsel and founder of Bloomberg LP’s pro bono program, volunteered her time to help launch Kidspire, and describes Domingo-Moran as “a role model” who “demonstrates that one small business owner can really make a difference in their local community.” Farkas’s experience makes her a committed champion of transactional pro bono work: “Emerging entrepreneurs are fantastic clients! They have so much energy, drive and enthusiasm to get their businesses off the ground and their excitement is contagious. After my 30-minute clinic consultation with Karen Domingo-Moran, I was happy to continue working with her to develop a contract template for her after-school programs.”



Farkas’s perspective also highlights the pay-it-forward dimensions of transactional pro bono work—both in terms of its impact on a client, and that client’s consequent impact on our community. Remarking, in light of her work on Kidspire’s behalf, how “a few hours of pro bono advice can have an immeasurable impact on a client’s business,” Farkas opined

that Kidspire “is introducing students to a new way of looking at the buildings in New York City that they pass every day. She is sparking their curiosity to learn about how these buildings are constructed and encouraging them to look at everything in our built environment with a creative eye. I hope she is inspiring future architects and artists!”

Similarly, Latham & Watkins corporate associate Brian Yoon, who along with corporate partner Senet Bischoff coordinated a team of more than a half-dozen attorneys assisting Martin in launching EAT SOCCER, observed that both the substance of Martin’s matter and her own spirit in pushing it forward allowed “members of the corporate, tax and IP departments to work together on a pro bono project with an inspiring entrepreneur whose business model and determination made her a standout client.” Yoon further remarked that Martin “was really a force all on her own, always working on creating partnerships”—so much so that even now, more than a year after

his firm helped her create a business entity for EAT SOCCER and helped her draft agreements, Martin “continues to reach out to her legal team at Latham & Watkins to invite them to EAT SOCCER sponsored events.”

In short, Yoon’s observations demonstrate how transactional pro bono—in this instance, in the sports and entertainment spaces that EAT SOCCER inhabits—builds the relationships that build businesses, which in turn create previously unimagined networking and other opportunities rich in potential. Communities benefit, and so too do the attorneys who play a key role in helping it all to happen.

Akira Arroyo is the founder and legal director of the City Bar Justice Center’s Neighborhood Entrepreneur Law Project, which since 2001 has partnered with more than 100 law firms, 25 corporate legal departments, and 30 community-based organizations to assist more than 14,000 low- to moderate-income micro-entrepreneurs by providing brief services, direct representation, legal clinics, and community presentations.

Kurt M. Denk is Pro Bono Counsel at the City Bar Justice Center, where he develops pro bono-oriented CLEs, publications, trainings, outreach opportunities, and new legal services projects, and serves as a liaison to law firms, corporate in-house counsel, and individual attorneys to support and staff pro bono cases originating from the Justice Center’s dozen projects serving low-income New Yorkers.

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