

Joe Bocoock, Pro Bono Attorney for Legal Aid

Translating Big-Firm Strategies to Effective Indigent Representation

By Teresa Rendon

Community service is a family affair for the Bocoocks. Joe's brother is a minister at the Cresskill Universal Church of Christ in New Jersey. Joe's wife Denice has been named Volunteer of the Year by Oklahoma Lawyers for Children and has in recent years become a Court Appointed Special Advocate. As for Joe, in addition to his practice of law at McAfee & Taft where he has been a shareholder since 1983, he has been tirelessly involved in state and county bar activities: fellow of the Oklahoma Bar Foundation for many years, committee chair for two committees of the Oklahoma County Bar Association, and chair of the OBA Paralegal Committee until 2010. Clearly, Joe's time spent on bar and community activities has not affected his representation of his clients, as he has been named by Chambers USA as one of America's Leading Lawyers for Business in the field of litigation and has been selected for inclusion in Best Lawyer in America in the field of litigation every year since 2001.

For years, Joe has volunteered for the pro bono clinic at Epworth Methodist

Church on the third Saturday of each month. "It is very fulfilling work because you really help people who are powerless and helpless. I admire the whole Legal Aid staff. They are so professional and practical." At the Epworth legal clinics, Legal Aid attorneys and volunteer attorneys advise and counsel indigent persons who face civil legal problems.

Bocoock recalled his experience assisting debtors after the July 5, 1982 Penn Square Bank failures which sent Oklahoma's economy and the legal profession into a tailspin. Because of his representation of oil companies, real estate companies, and hotels, among others, Bocoock became seasoned in debt workouts. Sometimes, he noted, the most practical strategy was to "cut bait" and propose a workout option with clients' creditors. This experience has been invaluable to the poverty clients at Epworth. They have debt problems too, that often require legal services which they could never afford. Joe believes the key to a satisfying experience is translating expertise and experience into this new environment, being patient with the clients, and really listening to them. He adds that it would be so easy just to tell a judgment-proof client just to stop paying his bills, but they often need more than that. They are frightened and unsure of themselves and need an attorney to assist them in dealing with creditors and government agencies.

One of the cases Bocoock recalls was that of a lady who was being evicted from a "rent" house for failure to pay her rent for several months. She had a contract for deed and believed she was the owner of the property and thought she had been building up equity for years. The landlord was evidently not aware that a contract for deed was considered by statute as a mortgage. Legal Aid attorney Marilyn Statts collaborated with Bocoock in this case when he was unable to appear at the forcible entry and detainer (FED) hearing and was granted a dismissal/transfer of the case. Joe recalls going out to the home to conduct a property inspection all dressed up in his lawyerly suit and having a chicken run past him in the front yard. The upshot of Joe's adept representation was that his grateful and astonished client received a new place to live as well as a sizeable monetary settlement, enough to pay rent for several months.

In another case, Joe was able to use his experience dealing with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). This time his client was a impoverished gentleman who had been disabled after a stroke and whose

tiny apartment was so devoid of amenities that he slept in a chair. This gentleman whose sole income was Social Security disability payments, had his bank account levied upon by the IRS because of failure to pay income taxes. He literally woke up one morning with no money for food, rent

or anything else. This is the kind of problem that can be resolved, but says Bocoock, "You need a lawyer to do it for you; one who knows what kind of income is exempt from levy. I have done work like this for many of my business clients, so it was easy to see how to help this very terrified man." A meeting with an IRS agent and the client in Bocoock's office resulted in a lifting of the levies and a return of the client's money. Since then the client has not

been levied upon again.

And, all of this work would not be possible without the assistance of his secretary Annette Young who has learned to translate her big-firm skills to those needed to help poverty clients. She has a talent for talking to these clients, allaying their fears.



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