

# SPECIAL REPORT

Pro Bono

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## Finding Pro Bono Opportunities For In-House Transactional Lawyers

*Rachel Epps Spears, Executive Director, Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta, talks with Happy R. Perkins, Vice President of the General Electric Company and General Counsel of GE Energy, about the Atlanta in-house legal community's commitment to pro bono service. For more information visit [www.pbpatl.org](http://www.pbpatl.org).*

**Spears:** Thank you for the excellent leadership that you are contributing as a member of the Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta's board. We appreciate your fitting volunteer services in with your responsibilities at GE Energy, which must be very challenging.

**Perkins:** GE's largest individual business, GE Energy, makes big turbines powered by natural gas, wind, water, nuclear or other energy sources. Of the 70 or so members in our law department worldwide, about 25 are here in Atlanta, which is GE Energy's global headquarters.

I moved from serving as the General Counsel of GE Appliances to GE Energy in 2002. At that time, about 80 percent of GE Energy's earnings were from sales of equipment with most of that income being generated in North America. Last year well over half of our earnings were generated from sales outside the U.S., and about 70 percent of the total earnings were generated from the provision of services, not from the sales of equipment.

Our big challenge is to globalize very quickly to serve our growth markets that support the infrastructure of the developing world.

**Spears:** You have made an effort to find pro bono opportunities for the lawyers at GE Energy. Typically pro bono efforts serve individuals as the beneficiaries of legal services. The Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta is built around serving the nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations that provide services to poor and disadvantaged individuals.

**Perkins:** This approach is so important because transactions attorneys like me need help to find pro bono opportunities within our areas of expertise. Litigation attorneys can



Happy R. Perkins

easily find many pro bono opportunities to use what they do for a living to help people in need. However, lawyers who do mergers and acquisitions, for example, would not be able to translate their transactional skills to help lower income people directly.

Most transactional lawyers have to spend a Saturday morning for pro bono training to do something different from what they do for a living. There is nothing wrong with that, but you always leave that with the feeling that you did not provide the same value to your pro bono clients that you provide to your employer.

The beauty of the Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta is that we help transactional lawyers to do pro bono work on interesting, sophisticated projects within their areas of expertise. When you do that, you get a measure of satisfaction that is higher than you get from doing work in an area where you are not as skilled.

**Spears:** Pro Bono Partnership of

Atlanta is modeled after the Pro Bono Partnership, which was founded in 1997 by the Corporate Bar of Westchester County, NY, and Fairfield County, CT, and expanded to New Jersey in 2000. Like the Pro Bono Partnership, we match business law attorneys, particularly in-house attorneys, with pro bono opportunities that address the legal needs of nonprofits – organizations that frequently operate with severe financial constraints and cannot afford to hire a lawyer, even though they have many of the same legal needs as for-profit corporations.

**Perkins:** I got involved with Pro Bono Partnership through two GE lawyers. One was Bob Healing, a senior GE lawyer in Fairfield, CT, now retired, who was very involved in the organization. The other is Ivan Fong, the new general counsel of Car-

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dinal Health, who had been very involved in the New York-area Pro Bono Partnership as well. They approached me not long after I arrived at GE Energy about the prospect of developing a Pro Bono Partnership in Atlanta. Our organization is not a subsidiary or affiliate of the New York-area organization. As stand-alone organizations, we hope to maintain a close-knit federation. The vision is to build a Pro Bono Partnership in other cities.

**Spears: The leaders of Atlanta's in-house legal community are generously supporting Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta.**

**Perkins:** Mike Kline of Coca-Cola chairs our board. I was introduced to Mike by Frank Landgraff, the Senior Intellectual Property lawyer here at GE Energy who is also on our board. Like Mike and Frank, Leah Cooper from AGL Resources was involved from the first meeting, as was Kendall Butterworth from BellSouth. Randy Stephens from Home Depot came to our first meeting, and we later involved Frank Fernandez, who is Home Depot's general counsel. Sally Hogsette has participated on behalf of Delta Airlines, and Southern Company recently got involved with our organization. All of these companies have made significant contributions to Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta.

These leading companies enthusiastically participate because Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta is serving a need we all share. Here at GE Energy, I had been

struggling to come up with pro bono opportunities for our attorneys, most of whom are transactional lawyers. The coordination by Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta is attractive because it satisfies that need on behalf of GE Energy lawyers and the legal departments of the other corporations in Atlanta.

Another added benefit is that volunteers are covered by Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta's malpractice insurance policy. Volunteers appreciate the fact that Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta offers discrete and manageable matters and provides ongoing assistance to the volunteer attorneys. They also know that if they take on a matter and later get too busy to handle it, they can call Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta, and the matter can be reassigned. We make sure that the experience is good for our volunteers so that they are anxious to come back and do it again.

**Spears: Several Atlanta law firms have been very involved in the formation of Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta as well.**

**Perkins:** I congratulate the law firms that partner with us in supporting Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta. Sutherland Asbill & Brennan LLP donated our office space in addition to making a contribution. Kilpatrick Stockton LLP and King & Spalding LLP were also there at the beginning and made contributions. We also have contributions from Troutman Sanders LLP and Seyfarth Shaw LLP. None of these law firms were solicited. They stepped up, and we are very grateful for their help in getting us off the ground.

**Spears: The Pro Bono Partnership of**

**Atlanta publicizes its services to non-profits through direct contact with the organizations and through umbrella organizations, such as the Georgia Center for Nonprofits. We also recruit new clients by offering workshops on legal topics of interest to nonprofits and through our website, www.pbpatl.org.**

**We send e-mails to our volunteer lawyers every month that describe available volunteer opportunities. Lawyers can compare their interests, background and skill sets with clients' needs. This allows lawyers to take on the pro bono work they feel comfortable with and also enjoy.**

**What are some examples of the work your team has performed through our organization?**

**Perkins:** One example involves Ann McWhorter, GE Energy's Senior Counsel for Compliance and a fine lawyer. Just a few weeks ago, she got an assignment from Pro Bono Partnership of

Atlanta. The client was a community development corporation (CDC) in Atlanta looking for a program coordinator to help guide low-income households into home ownership. Ann quickly drafted a quality agreement that a for-profit corporation would pay hundreds of dollars an hour to have a lawyer draft.

Another example involves Billy Palmer, a real estate attorney at AGL Resources, who assisted a nonprofit in connection with an individual's donation of a parcel of land to the nonprofit organization. In making sure that the title was clear and that the tax deduction was available for the donor, Billy performed the type of legal work that he does every day.

These volunteer lawyers thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to represent nonprofits that are doing great work here in Atlanta, and the nonprofit clients, who otherwise would have gone without a lawyer in these situations, were incredibly grateful to the volunteers and Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta.

## Pro Bono – Law Firms

### Weil Gotshal Heralded By London's thelawyer.com

Based on the initial success of its revitalized and restructured pro bono program, the firm of Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP has decided to set the bar higher and, by so doing, offer an example other firms might follow.

A new pro bono policy adopted by the firm's Management Committee seeks to involve every attorney at Weil Gotshal – from first-year associates to senior partners – in the firm's pro bono efforts.

"Weil Gotshal is a great law firm, but we aspire to be something more: a great institution," said Steven A. Reiss, chairman of the firm's Pro Bono Committee. "That means going beyond professional excellence to being a model in providing assistance that positively impacts the civic life of our communities."

The almost unprecedented commitment by Weil's lawyers to pro bono services has even caught the eye of a UK-based legal news service, thelawyer.com, which recently interviewed Nick Flynn, an associate with the firm's London office. Weil's London team is a top pro bono performer within the firm and in the UK legal community, winning several awards for its outstanding work.

As part of its effort to revitalize its pro bono service, Weil Gotshal in 2004 formed a Pro Bono Committee, involving partners and associates from every one of the firm's 20 offices and from each practice group, to coordinate pro bono efforts and maximize the impact of the firm's pro bono work.

The firm also hired Miriam Buhl as its full-time pro bono counsel. With extensive executive experience in the nonprofit arena, she is responsible for developing new pro bono opportunities and partnerships for the firm. She previously served as state director of the New York Chapter of the March of Dimes and as executive director of The New York Women's Foundation.

Ms. Buhl's arrival was greeted enthusiastically within the firm. "It's a real

step-change in the way in which a major law firm is dealing with this issue," said Nick Flynn in his interview with thelawyer.com. "She is there to embed our relationships with other institutions in the charity and pro bono field and, rather like a partner who is head of corporate or head of banking, she is there with responsibility for setting the strategy and targets for pro bono."

The revitalization program launched in 2004 resulted in a 60 percent increase in Weil Gotshal's pro bono hours.

To ensure continued pro bono success, Weil Gotshal's new pro bono policy includes the goal that every lawyer in the firm provide 50 hours of pro bono work each year; the expectation that every partner take or supervise at least one pro bono matter each year, and the requirement that every entering lawyer – from first-year associate to lateral partner – take at least one pro bono matter during his or her first two years at the firm. The firm believes the pro bono requirement for entering lawyers may be a first in the industry.

"Developing our new policy and hiring Miriam were important steps in a larger endeavor to make the firm's pro bono work a model for the profession," Mr. Reiss said recently. "The long-term goal of our new pro bono policy is to set a standard that other firms can emulate."

The firm's renewed dedication to providing pro bono services to those with unmet legal needs hasn't gone unnoticed. Weil Gotshal has been the recipient of more than a dozen awards recently to acknowledge the firm's efforts on behalf of the disadvantaged or under-represented.

"We take great pride in these successes, especially those in service to our communities' neediest members," said Stephen J. Dannhauser, chairman of the firm. "We know that 'justice for all' begins with each of us taking seriously the professional obligation we share as lawyers."

Sutherland Asbill & Brennan LLP

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Congratulates

Rachel Epps Spears

Executive Director

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