

# A devotion to community service can produce long term dividends

Community service.

Two words that serve as the sixth pillar of Primerus™, forever symbolizing an abiding commitment to put service above self.

Or as Winston Churchill once said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”

In large measure, Churchill’s words define the importance of community service in leading a well-rounded life, one built upon a desire to help others for the betterment of society.

Such was the message that was delivered during a recent Community Service Webinar presented by Primerus™. As chair of the Community Service Committee, I was chiefly responsible for presenting the web program on April 19, although important contributions were made by committee members John Pearce of Gordon Arata in New Orleans, Tim Sullivan of Ogden Sullivan in Tampa, Melissa Demorest LeDuc of the Demorest Law Firm in Detroit, and Brian Block of Mandelbaum Barrett in New Jersey.

Each had their stories to share about the value of giving back to the community, and how that investment of time and talent can yield dividends far beyond the number of hours spent in terms of manpower.

The benefits of volunteerism, according to those participating in the webinar, are as many as they are varied, and include marketing opportunities, team building and staff unity, leadership development, and creation of a firm culture that can attract potential clients.

In the past, there may have been a general hesitancy by some law firms to devote much time or energy to community service initiatives, viewing it as a losing

proposition when calculated against the importance of the billable hour. But in recent years, that view has shifted significantly, as a growing number of firms see the rewards that giving back can bring.

The Tampa firm of Ogden Sullivan Stover & Saar, P.A. is a prime example, particularly in how it celebrated its 25th anniversary in a very giving way.

“We called it ‘A Year of Service,’ where we supported a different charity each month,” said Tim Sullivan, one of the founding members of the civil defense firm. “We made a big deal of it with a committee from our staff choosing which charities to support.”

The firm held a fall kickoff reception, inviting clients, community leaders, and members of the local judiciary, attracting a large turnout that generated a positive buzz in the community for the good work to come.

At one point during the year-long celebration, Sullivan and several other attorneys at the firm even went so far as to have their heads shaved by a pediatric cancer survivor as a show of support for the harrowing medical journey she and other children have experienced while undergoing treatments. Their willingness to be “shaved” produced an unexpected side benefit in terms of “great publicity” for the firm from local media outlets, further enhancing its image in the community.

Brian Block, a partner with Mandelbaum Barrett, had similar success stories to share, while stressing the importance of involving every level of the firm’s staff in its community service projects.

“We have branded our efforts as



“Team Mandelbaum,” Block said, noting that staff members “love” having the opportunity to offer input on which charities to support and feel a sense of “buy in” that enhances employee morale.

John Pearce, a longtime attorney with Gordon Arata, said the firm’s community service outreach efforts have helped speed the development of leadership qualities in some of its younger attorneys, while also giving them greater visibility in the legal community.

Relatedly, he said, the firm’s pro bono efforts have produced an important two-fold benefit, “fostering a respect for the law” along with demonstrating a commitment to serving “underrepresented individuals” in the community.

Melissa Demorest LeDuc, a business attorney at the Demorest Law Firm, said her firm has been consistently involved in hunger relief efforts in the Detroit community, supporting the Forgotten

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Harvest program that stocks food pantries for the needy. She also is a member of Impact100, a group of 100 women in the Oakland County community who have come together to “engage in impactful, large-scale giving to support nonprofits” serving the region.

Speaking from my own experience, our giving culture at Widerman Malek in Melbourne, Fla. was shaped largely a decade ago when we launched a program to help disabled children in our area.

In our first year of sponsoring a youth kickball tournament, we raised nearly \$40,000 to fund the purchase

of medical devices to help disabled children and their families. The “No Bad Days Foundation” that we created has since grown to become a positive and dependable source of financial help for countless disabled kids in the community, and is a special source of pride for everyone who works at our firm.

For law firms interested in becoming more active in community service programs, Widerman Malek attorney Ralph Dyer offered several pieces of sound advice during the webinar, encouraging them to “piggyback” with an existing 501(c)(3) organization instead of

going through the sometimes-laborious process of creating their own nonprofit that has tax-exempt status with the IRS.

Whatever approach your firm decides to take, rest assured that the decision to commit to a consistent program of community service will raise your profile in the legal profession, helping establish an identity that will be admired for years to come.

Best regards,

**Mark Warzecha**

**Chair, Community Service Committee**