

Law360 Picks 10 Pro Bono Standouts

By **Christine Caulfield**

Many law firms pledge a strong commitment to public service nowadays, but only some stress pro bono work as a central tenet: clocking an impressive attorney participation rate while taking on challenging legal work to serve the public good. These firms treat pro bono work as a core value, and for that they have made Law360's Pro Bono Firms of 2010 list.

Law360's inaugural pro bono firms of the year series — which kicks off today — honors firms that stood out above the rest, not only for the amount of free legal work performed by their lawyers but for their willingness to tackle tough pro bono cases with the same commitment that they bring to paid work.

Law360's Pro Bono Firms Of 2010 are Covington & Burling, Dechert, Dewey & LeBoeuf, Foley Hoag, Gibson Dunn, Jenner & Block, Morrison & Foerster, O'Melveny & Myers, Robins Kaplan and Skadden Arps.

These firms averaged 100 hours or more of pro bono work per attorney from mid-2009 to mid-2010, took on some of the most difficult, high-profile legal cases of the past year and won.

Law360 invited nominations from more than 400 U.S. firms and received 75 submissions, all of which pointed to a commendable body of pro bono work and underscored a growing commitment by law firms in general to actively seek out pro bono opportunities.

And while most of this work consists of “day-to-day” projects on behalf of the poor and disadvantaged, there is a growing effort by major law firms to take on more time-consuming and controversial matters, said Esther Lardent, president and CEO of the Pro Bono Institute, a nonprofit organization housed at the Georgetown University Law Center.

“Civil rights matters, Guantanamo Bay detainee representation, human rights cases, death penalty work, and protecting the integrity of elections are all increasingly part of the pro bono docket of major firms,” Lardent said.

“There is a strong sense that the key issues of the day are shaping the future of the legal system and our constitutional rights, and that it is vitally important that lawyers step up to be part of those decisions and deliberations,” she said.

That was certainly the case with the 10 firms ultimately selected for inclusion in Law 360's pro bono series, which will run over the next two weeks.

These firms took their commitment to pro bono service seriously, representing clients in cases ranging from everyday struggles by the underprivileged for disability benefits and fair housing to the headline-grabbing issues of the day.

One firm that earned a spot on our list stood out for its role in a historic victory for married same-sex couples in the first multiplaintiff challenge to the Defense of Marriage Act in a Massachusetts federal court.

This firm helped secure a ruling in July that Section 3 of DOMA was unconstitutional, and that its 17 individual pro bono clients — who were married to a person of the same sex under state law — were entitled to the same federal spousal benefits and protections as every other married couple.

Another firm made our list for its landmark victory before the U.S. Supreme Court, where it challenged the life-without-parole sentence of a juvenile offender charged with nonhomicide crimes.

The justices ruled in May for the firm's young client, Terrance Graham, that a nonparole life sentence for an offense in which no one is killed violated the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment, a ruling that marked the first time in the high court's history that a whole class of offenders was excluded from a certain punishment.

Yet another firm got a nod for a body of pro bono work that included representation of Jesse Ray "Jody" Beard, the youngest of the so-called Jena Six — a group of black teenagers charged with attempted murder after a fight injured a white student at Jena High School in Louisiana.

The firm was part of the legal team that secured the recusal of the presiding judge in Jody's case and successfully negotiated a reduction of the 14-year-old's criminal charge to a misdemeanor. One partner at the firm took his commitment to pro bono work to the next level, assuming legal guardianship of Jody.

These are just a few of many instances that show attorneys going above and beyond the call of duty in carrying out pro bono commitments, and while Law360 is proud to present this list of pro bono firms for 2010, the plethora of impressive applications demonstrates that pro bono service has become institutionalized in major U.S. firms.

PBI's most recent survey — completed in mid-2010 — indicates that pro bono is holding its own despite reductions in head count and substantial changes in firm policies and procedures, according to Lardent.

“[There is] a strong consensus that pro bono is a core value of quality law firms, and that it does not take away from the firms’ bottom line, but rather adds value,” she said.