



Pro Bono Partner View: Ben Gipson

Pro Bono Update

14 July 2020

Ben Gipson (Los Angeles) is an Employment partner who supports his clients through all stages of development and serves as a trusted advisor for employment needs, with a special focus on the Media, Sports and Entertainment sector. His pro bono work focuses on immigration, environmental justice, food security and nonprofits that serve marginalized communities. He currently serves on the board of the Los Angeles chapter of the Positive Coaching Alliance, an organization that uses evidence-based curriculum to cultivate positive, character-building environments through youth sports. Ben previously served on the board of Big City Mountaineers, a nonprofit that promotes critical life skills to under-resourced youth through transformative wilderness mentoring experiences.

When and how did you first get involved with pro bono work?

As soon as I was allowed to step into court, I immediately got involved in pro bono work. I have always felt so lucky to be in the position that I am in, and have sought to help people in any way that I can. Isn't that our job as lawyers – to help our clients? From the beginning, I fully understood that many people cannot afford the help they need.

I started working on pro bono matters in law school at a criminal justice clinic; after law school, I worked on death penalty and immigration matters as an associate at another firm. I have always tried to do whatever I can, whenever I can, to support clients in need who otherwise would not be able to afford legal services.

You devote time to a broad range of pro bono matters and subject areas – from environmental justice, immigration matters, food bank issues and the employment and corporate needs of nonprofits. Can you tell us about why you have chosen to focus on these areas and how your pro bono work has evolved through the years?

It's a combination of factors. I assess how I can help using the experience I have gained from my employment practice, but the subject of my pro bono work must also be something I care deeply about. For example, I believe the immigration system is broken and feel I have a responsibility help, even if in small ways. I believe that those who need representation should get it, and for immigrants who flee their countries, it can mean life or death. I also work with nonprofits that serve marginalized communities. I want to do anything I can to help these organizations on the backend so they can keep doing great work. My philosophy is simple: if we don't fix the world now, it will be screwed up for our children.

You regularly supervise, mentor and encourage junior lawyers' pro bono work. Why do you think pro bono is important for associates? What tips would you give to new lawyers looking to incorporate pro bono into their work?

Because we are so privileged and fortunate, we should find ways to give back by donating our time, knowledge and skills to help others. I push this message to everyone I mentor.

As for tips – don't do pro bono to build your skillset. If you're going to do pro bono work, find something you are passionate about, something that really moves you, and put your efforts and skills into it. After all, the people you're supporting are clients, and just like any other client, you must give your pro bono clients 100 percent of your effort. I am always willing to mentor those who want to do pro bono work if the focus is something they're passionate about, because it shows in their work and I want to support that level of client service.

You have a long history of involvement with Big City Mountaineers, including serving as board president for several years. Tell us about the organization and why its mission is important to you.

Big City Mountaineers (BCM) is a Denver-based nonprofit with hubs in San Francisco, Minneapolis, Portland, Seattle and Boston. Its mission is to instill important life skills in under-resourced youth through mentored wilderness experiences. Through BCM's programs, kids can come to know the feeling of having someone there for them, giving their time to be out in the wilderness just to listen to them. That's a really powerful combination.

I have always loved the wilderness. I think it stems from my childhood with busy parents. My time outdoors gave me freedom to be independent and resourceful. It gave me confidence all the way through college, especially when I joined Army ROTC.

I spent about twelve years fundraising and serving on BCM's national council. I love the work that they do and I love the outdoors. I've climbed Mt. Rainier, Mt. Hood, Kilimanjaro, scrambled in the Palisades and attempted to climb Mt. Whitney, all as part of BCM's fundraising efforts.

Food banks have played a critical role in responding to the COVID-19 crisis. What are you seeing from where you sit?

There is no better place to see or understand the need for a social safety net than food banks. Working with food banks has shown me the challenges people face. Volunteers are often in similar situations to those who access the food bank; so many people are hurting at a time when the safety net has been taken away from them. Food banks have had to pivot on a dime because people absolutely need these resources right now; they are vital to the communities they serve, and that's why it's so important to support them.

How will this current moment affect your approach to pro bono in the future?

Since 2016, my pro bono work has become increasingly more focused. I am actively seeking to represent people in marginalized communities by finding ways to help individuals or helping on a policy level, such as working directly with food banks or on a larger issue such as juvenile bail reform. I have also doubled down on immigration matters.

To me, silence is complicity. You can tell what is important to lawyers because value is measured by how they spend their time. If we are not willing to spend our time addressing these issues right now, then we are complicit in those issues continuing. As lawyers, our responsibility is not just to voice our support of communities in need, but to actively address the underlying issues. I am in an amazing position, and I have a responsibility to spend some of my time making a difference. We must act now if we want to see a better future.