

Five Benefits I Got From Doing Pro Bono

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This paper is based on a talk given by Beth at the Student Pro Bono Conference held in Birmingham in November 2015

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Five Benefits I Got From Doing Pro Bono

This paper was presented by Beth Johnston, a final year LLB student, at the inaugural Birmingham Student Pro Bono Conference in November 2015. Beth was an active member of the Pro Bono Group during her time at Birmingham Law School. The Student Pro Bono Conference was organised by the University of Birmingham in conjunction with BPP and was hosted by Shoosmiths LLP.

1. First, I learnt the place that law students have in the world of law

During a law degree you learn about all the people who make up the legal system - judges, solicitors, barristers, paralegals and the many others who have an incredible wealth of knowledge and keep the cogs turning. Many of us start out with ambitions of where we hope to be once we graduate, and aspire to various roles, but it can seem a long way off! Being involved with pro bono projects has taught me that law students also have a role to play in the legal system, and while we rely heavily on the assistance and wisdom of those guiding us, it squarely puts those being educated about the law into a role that not only enhances our knowledge but gives us a purpose as we learn.

2. Secondly, I've been able to experience the importance of using our privileged position to give back

As a mature student who took a slightly unusual route to get into university, I was acutely aware from the offset how fortunate I was to be able to study law at the University of Birmingham, and it was important to me personally that I be able to use that privilege to help others. There was no doubt in my mind that I would get involved in pro bono projects as soon as possible. A law degree is certainly an exercise in the rigours of academia, but I think it is essential for law students to also stay connected to the legal system, to the people it helps and to the people who can't access justice or who need assistance in meandering their way through the complexities of court proceedings. Which brings me onto the third thing that I discovered, which is....

3. The realities of the civil law system & the complexities of the court!

During my ongoing volunteering with the Personal Support Unit, it has been highlighted to me just how difficult it can be for individuals who need it the most to access justice, and being able to use what little knowledge I have to help them fill in forms, explain the system to them and calm their fears has had a huge impact on me personally. Even if it is just to explain that the court room they will be in does not look like the ones on television! I may not have the legal knowledge of those who advise and guide me, but showing compassion and being there to sit next to a litigant in person in court and explain the process to them can make a difference, as they feel less alone and understand more of what happens. As legal aid continues to be chipped away at by politics, organisations like the PSU can help to bridge the gap and it's an honour to be involved with them.

4. Fourth, I have discovered the fulfilment of being able to pursue passion

I have always wanted to go into the field of human rights, it has long since been a passion of mine but one which was only ever expressed hesitantly once at university and surrounded by highly ambitious

and intelligent individuals wanting to go into diverse areas such as conveyancing, family and corporate law. I felt somewhat like an idealistic & naive student who would eventually choose to do something more lucrative! But being able to do pro bono projects reignited that passion, allowed me to pursue the law in the fields I wanted to and learn about the options that might await me upon graduation. I've also met some inspirational and like-minded students and professionals. This was especially the case when working with SIFA Fireside last year, being able to talk to clients and offer advice and guidance as they faced seemingly overwhelming situations helped me to fully grasp just how fulfilling it can be when one is able to pursue what they are passionate about.

5. Lastly I've learnt just how patient, giving & passionate those involved with pro bono can be

None of the projects I have been involved in, or any projects that students do, would be possible without the wisdom and guidance of the professionals who give up their time and expertise to support us. I have found the people I have worked with to be incredibly generous, in giving us students advice and taking an interest in our studies. They can also be inspiring in their passion for what they do, travelling to give us training, being available to answer questions that I'm sure can seem inane sometimes and gently guiding us or stepping in when our lacking legal knowledge fails us! Students wouldn't be able to play a role without the supervision of the legal professionals involved and I'm grateful for that.

It has been a privilege and an honour to be a part of the Pro Bono Group at Birmingham, to work on several different projects and to continue to be involved. It has consolidated my degree studies but also taught me infinitely more than I would have otherwise learnt. It has given me a more in depth knowledge of the legal system and particularly the judiciary, and introduced me to like-minded friends. Lastly it has kept me motivated and inspired to persevere with my degree and there is no doubt in my mind that when I qualify, I will continue to be involved in pro bono work and hopefully, help some students along the way.

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