

Glen Oaks MIDDLE MAGNET SCHOOL



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PARENT RESOURCE CENTER
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RAISING THE BAR

Story by Renée Bacher

Photo by Kim Ashford

“**F**irst thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers,” Shakespeare famously wrote in *Henry VI*. Considering the evidence of all the good that lawyers do, Shakespeare had it wrong. Dead wrong.

Just ask the students at the inner-city Glen Oaks Middle School in Baton Rouge. Because the largest law firm in town, Kean, Miller, Hawthorne, D’Armon, McCowan & Jarman took their school under its wing a decade ago, offering mentoring, tutoring and financial support, these kids see attorneys as real-life heroes and heroines.

Recently, a student at Glen Oaks was chosen to attend a leadership conference in Washington D.C., but couldn’t come up with the \$600 it would take to go. A school administrator suggested the girl contact the firm to see if they could help. Attorneys and staff promptly chipped in \$1,000 in travel expenses and “last I heard, she was on her way,” said Steve Boutwell, client services director at Kean Miller.

Each year, attorneys across the state contribute hundreds of thousands of otherwise billable hours to pro bono and community service work, even more since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. According to Sandy McCarthy-Brown, statewide volunteer coordinator at the Pro Bono Project, a nonprofit in New Orleans, the number of service hours completed by attorneys, paralegals and law students nearly quadrupled from the first quarter of 2005 to the first quarter of 2007. This includes attorneys from outside the state who came to pitch in after the storms. “As much as half of the New Orleans Bar left after Katrina,” she said. “We’re still trying to keep up with

an increased demand of legal services.” More than 1,500 volunteers are registered with the Pro Bono Project.

The storms have also increased demand for certain types of legal services more than others, McCarthy-Brown said.

Topping the list are wills and power of attorney, as many realize the devastating effects of not having their affairs in order, and family law, as couples who have lived apart but

not bothered to divorce realize that home insurance checks are made out to both parties. “We have seen some

property in the name of

the original purchaser that dates back to 1875,” she said. “FEMA or Road Home can’t make out a check to a possessor of a property until that possessor has title.”

The Louisiana Bar Foundation (LBF) also has many programs promoting pro bono services. LBF has awarded more than \$29.9 million to help address the unrealized legal needs of indigent citizens, provide a basic understanding of the law, and assist with improvements to the justice system. One program, the Pro Bono Legal Corps, matches law students with needy clients. “This program increases law student participation in pro bono work and furthers law student interest in public interest legal careers,” said Dennette Young, communications director. Students have interned with family law practitioners in Shreveport, Monroe and Natchitoches and started student chapters of the Animal Legal Defense Fund at LSU and Southern University in Baton Rouge. Others volunteer at the Renaissance Village FEMA trailer park in Baker.

While the Louisiana bar’s Rules of Professional Conduct

Louisiana’s lawyers make a practice of service.

YOUNG LAWYERS PROFESS THEIR IDEALS

Playing host to a series of after-hours socials for young attorneys across Louisiana has been an eye-opening experience for Melissa Flournoy, president/CEO of the Louisiana Association of Nonprofit Organizations (LANO).

The *Barristers for Boards* events match nonprofits with lawyers interested in volunteer service on boards and committees. “We expected 15 to 20 lawyers at each event, but more than 200 showed up and signed up,” Flournoy said.

A joint effort between LANO and the Louisiana State Bar Association’s Young Lawyers Division, *Barristers for Boards* is not intended to provide legal counsel to nonprofits, but rather to encourage young attorneys to share their skills in a wide variety of areas, including technology, marketing, accounting, evaluation and human resources. “We’re now looking at how to expand the number of nonprofits included,” said Flournoy. “The energy, enthusiasm and level of engagement are very encouraging.”

While most attorneys do pro bono work on their firm’s time, a growing number of are willing to dedicate their careers to the indigent and underserved.

With first-year associates starting \$88,000 to \$100,000 a year at Louisiana’s major law firms, The Pro Bono Project still managed to increase its staff from one to eight attorneys last year. These professionals make \$30,000 to \$50,000 annually.

To help with crushing law school debt, the Louisiana Bar Foundation offers \$5,000 grants to new or current public interest attorneys. In its first year, LBF made 29 awards totaling \$88,000.

encourage pro bono service as one of the ethical obligations of the profession, most firms do not require it. At New Orleans-based Adams & Reese, however, all attorneys are required to give at least 20 hours of free legal work annually. Most do more. “Community service is part of being an Adams & Reese attorney,” said managing partner Charles P. Adams. “It’s a core piece of our corporate culture.”

The firm is also a major sponsor of Louisiana Appleseed, part of the national Appleseed network of 16 public interest law centers working on practical and lasting solutions to chronic injustice.

“Appleseed Centers have the expertise, the flexibility and the independence to listen to unheard voices, uncover injustices and win the battles no one else fights,” said Christy Kane, an Adams & Reese partner who serves as full-time director with the firm’s blessings. So far, Louisiana Appleseed has enlisted more than two dozen volunteer attorneys across the state to work on projects such as writing mental health and child custody handbooks and resolving those thorny title-clearing issues for Road Home applicants.

Meanwhile, Kean Miller’s attorneys are active in The Dictionary Project, a national initiative that distributes free dictionaries to students in the third grade. Many educators see it as the threshold year between learning to read and reading to learn and in Louisiana, a personal dictionary on a third-grader’s desk can be a tool for success in the high stakes LEAP test in fourth grade.

Last year, Kean Miller provided more than 9,000 dictionaries in East Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge, Iberville and Calcasieu parishes. “As lawyers we deal in words and the meaning of words. We felt the dictionary project was trying to teach children the importance of the meaning of words,” said Boutwell. “It struck a chord with us.”

Kean Miller attorney Alan Berteau, who represents clients in complex litigation involving chemical exposure and industrial accidents, nurtures his love of words and language as co-captain of the Glen Oaks Middle School team in the Academic Distinction Fund’s Executive Spelling Bee, a unique collaboration between Baton Rouge business leaders and the public schools.

Teams consist of two public middle or high school students paired with two business or community leaders competing in a traditional spelling bee.

It’s a natural fit for Berteau, who grew up hooked on word games. His father would invite the whole family to take the “Increase your Word Power” quiz in *Reader’s Digest*, and “it was a great source of pride to score highest,” he recalled.

Now Berteau’s role as co-captain of Glen Oaks’ spelling bee team is to coach the young contestants if they get stuck on a word. The student always has the last word on whether the spelling is correct.

The high point of his volunteer experience was when a Glen Oaks teammate spelled the word “hyperbole” correctly, and the parents broke out in cheers. A low point: When a child on his team spelled “calamari” correctly and Berteau expressed some doubt; the child took Berteau’s suggestion and lost the round.

“I tell you what,” said Berteau, “I study the menu really well now any time I go out for Italian food.”

Renée Bacher freelances for national magazines from Baton Rouge.