

Not quite ready to quit

'Postretirement' lawyers finding greater satisfaction with nonprofits.

Matthew Huisman

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Children's Law Center special counsel Allen Snyder

Photo: Diego M. Radzinski / NLJ



D.C. Legal Aid Society volunteer staff attorney James Springer

Photo: Diego M. Radzinski / NLJ



Arent Fox's Marc Fleischaker

Photo: Diego M. Radzinski / LEGAL TIMES

After his 30-year career as a litigator at Hogan & Hartson ended in 2001, Allen Snyder was ready for an unusual retirement.

Snyder and his wife served as emergency foster care parents for more than 15 children in Montgomery County, Md., going so far as to adopt one of the children in 2005.

But the itch to practice law never fully left him. This time, though, he wanted to put his legal skills to use to help people, especially children — without the nonstop pressure of billable hours and finding new clients.

So earlier this year, when he was approached by the Children's Law Center, the largest pro bono legal services provider in Washington, he jumped at the chance. At the law center, he's been working a reduced-hour schedule on appellate cases regarding adoptions and neglect allegations.

"There is great unmet need in the community for pro bono service," Snyder said. "For a retiring lawyer, it is an opportunity to carve out a niche of the law that you care about. You can focus on the legal issues without focusing on economic factors."

There are many attorneys like Snyder in Washington — big-firm grinders who for decades worked 60- and 70-hour weeks, but who retired with fundamental needs unfulfilled. Nonprofits, with challenging cases and a desperate need for quality legal help, are filling the void.

Some legal public service advocates are trying to create more Allen Snyders by planting seeds among senior firm lawyers that pro bono work has numerous rewards — and that they can continue on that path after they retire by starting new careers with nonprofits.

Last October, the District of Columbia Access to Justice Commission and the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Program created a program to better engage firms with pro bono work called SAILS — Senior Attorneys Initiative for Legal Services. The program included 11 founding D.C.-based law offices.

"The point of SAILS was to institutionalize pro bono work among partner and senior lawyers," said Marc Fleischaker, Arent Fox partner and chair of the SAILS working group.

Maureen Syracuse, outgoing executive director of the D.C. Bar's Pro Bono Program, also is working to have senior attorneys spend their last several years as devoted to pro bono work as possible. "We are trying to tap all the resources of the firms," Syracuse said. Funding for legal service providers has always been scant, and the prolonged harsh economic times have compounded the issue. It has also made some lawyers more leery of hanging up their hat, even as more approach retirement age.

But she argues that, in their last years at their firms, some senior attorneys have an increasing desire to give back. "These are the people that went to law school to change the world," Syracuse said. "When they hit the last stage of their career, there will be a sizable number that want to do something more. We think we will find a number of lawyers with that mindset."

Robert Bruskin and James Springer, drawn to a second life in public service work after leaving the law completely, fit that bill.

In 1973, Bruskin, now 65, joined Howrey, Simon, Baker & Murchison [subsequently called Howrey] and spent 31 years mostly working on corporate deals involving the transfer of large sums of money between organizations. For the past seven years, he's served as the senior counsel of the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights.

Under his guidance, the organization has brought cases against large developers of multifamily housing, including apartment complexes, for violations of the Americans With Disabilities Act. "That has been a major initiative that has resulted in many settlements," Bruskin said.

Bruskin has also been involved in housing discrimination cases in Washington and neighboring Montgomery County. In both jurisdictions, it is illegal to discriminate against people who pay for housing using a federal subsidy payment, alimony or other voucher. As a result, thousands of apartment units are now available to those who were previously illegally denied housing.

"In many cases you're making an enormous difference in their life," Bruskin said. "Bringing the cases and settling them has had an enormous impact."

In 2004, Springer, 77, left Dickstein Shapiro as one of its top antitrust lawyers. The next year, he was hired part-time as an attorney with the D.C. Legal Aid Society. Springer mainly does intake interviews with clients and also handles a lot of benefits claims related to Social Security, Medicaid and food stamps. For him, the adjustment has been smooth — but not without its own challenges.

"Social Security law is as complicated as any subject matter I've dealt with," Springer said. "What I didn't expect is how frustrating it is and how long it takes to get things done. We are dealing with bureaucrats who have impossible workloads."

Ultimately, Springer said it's about helping his clients who often times survive on meager benefits.

"I deal with real people," Springer said. "I've never been hugged by a client until I came to work for Legal Aid. I do this for myself as much as I do this for other people."

Matthew Huisman can be reached at mhuisman@alm.com.