

# Southern District of Florida celebrates National Pro Bono Week<sup>1</sup>

By Laurel Myerson Isicoff<sup>2</sup>  
U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Southern District of Florida

*"I will never reject, from any consideration personal to myself, the cause of the defenseless or oppressed. . ."*

– Oath of Admission to The Florida Bar

*"Every lawyer, regardless of professional prominence or professional work load, has a responsibility to provide legal services to those unable to pay. . ."*

– Comment to Rule 6.1 of the Rules Governing the Georgia Bar

*"Every lawyer, regardless of professional prominence or professional workload, should find time to participate in or otherwise support the provision of legal services to the disadvantaged. The provision of free legal services to those unable to pay reasonable fees continues to be an obligation of each lawyer as well as the profession generally. . ."*

– Comment to Rule 6.1 of the Alabama Rules of Professional Conduct

Five years ago, the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service launched Pro Bono Week, an event that is now observed internationally.<sup>3</sup> Pro Bono Week 2014 was scheduled for Oct. 19 – 25. The Southern District of Florida planning was well under way this summer. Judge Patricia Seitz, U.S. District Court, and I put together an incredible team of lawyers, who, working closely with our bankruptcy and district court clerks' offices, organized a full month of recognition events, recruitment events and various methods of raising awareness about the need for, and the benefits of, pro bono service.<sup>4</sup>

Starting in early August, Team Pro Bono met regularly. The Bankruptcy Court team members were Dan Gonzalez of Meland Russin & Budwick, immediate past-president of the Bankruptcy Bar Association of the Southern District of Florida ("BBA"), Annika Miranda and Marcia Pereira, co-Chairs of the Pro Bono Committee of the BBA, Tina Talarchyk of The Talarchyk Firm and Leslie Cloyd of Berger Singerman PA (pro bono vice chairs for West Palm Beach and Broward respectively), and Clay Roberts, floating law clerk for the Bankruptcy Court.

On the District Court team were Ana Maria Martinez of the Office of the U.S. Attorney, now immediate past-president of the Miami Chapter of the Federal Bar Association ("FBA"), Candace Duff of Duff Law and Mediation, now president of the Miami Chapter of the FBA, Mark Levy of Brinkley Morgan, president of the Broward Chapter of the FBA, Ryon McCabe of McCabe Rabin, PA, president of the Palm Beach Chapter of the FBA, Heather Ries of Fox Rothschild LLP and Ryan Zagare of Kenny Nachwalter.

Our clerk coordinators were Joe Falzone, Deputy Clerk of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court, and Steve Larimore, Clerk of the District Court, who, with their staff, made tremendous contributions to the success of our Pro Bono Week celebrations.

In the weeks leading up to the "main event," Team Pro Bono developed sign-up sheets for volunteers for Bankruptcy Court and District Court opportunities<sup>5</sup> and we also created a poster and sticker:

(Photos by Judge Laurel Myerson Isicoff)

**I signed up for PRO BONO today!**

**Celebrate Pro Bono** National Pro Bono Celebration  
October 19 - 25, 2014

THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF FLORIDA CELEBRATES NATIONAL PRO BONO WEEK 2014

WHY VOLUNTEER FOR A PRO BONO OPPORTUNITY?  
PRO BONO CLIENTS NEED YOUR HELP, AND YOU PROMISED TO BE THERE.  
"I WILL NEVER REJECT, FROM ANY CONSIDERATION PERSONAL TO MYSELF, THE CAUSE OF THE DEFENSELESS OR OPPRESSED..."

**FIND A PRO BONO OPPORTUNITY TODAY!**

Online at one of the following websites:  
U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida:  
<http://www.sdb.uscourts.gov>  
U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Southern District of Florida:  
<http://www.sdb.uscourts.gov>

Visit the ONE Campaign's interactive online map to find a pro bono opportunity near you:  
<http://www.onecampaign.org>

In person: Stop by our sign-up desks during National Pro Bono Week 2014!

**NATIONAL PRO BONO WEEK 2014 LOCAL EVENTS**

**PRO SE CLINICS AT U.S. BANKRUPTCY COURT**  
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 22  
WEST PALM BEACH COURTHOUSE 11:30 AM - 1:30 PM  
1315 NORTH FLORIDA DRIVE, 2ND FLOOR, COURTROOM A

**LIBRARY OPPORTUNITIES**  
MONDAY, OCTOBER 20  
201 N. NEAM AVENUE, TRAINING ROOM  
FORT LAUDERDALE COURTHOUSE 12 P.M. - 1:30 P.M.  
700 EAST BROWARD BOULEVARD, ROOM 312

**LIBRARY OPPORTUNITIES**  
SPECIAL SERVICES DISTRICT "PORT PALM LODGE" 10:30 A.M. - 12 P.M.  
HEART LIBRARY 951 SE MONTGOMERY ROAD, STUART, FLORIDA 34906

\*FOR A COMPLETE CALENDAR OF EVENTS, PLEASE VISIT THE COURT WEBSITE LISTED ABOVE.\*

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## Pro Bono Week

We also put together a calendar of events that included all the events occurring around the District including events being organized by our pro bono counterparts in the various counties that make up the Southern District of Florida.

And then the countdown began. We started off with the Broward Federal Bar Association luncheon. Our poster was featured prominently (reprints in flyer form were handed out to all attending) and our sign-up sheets debuted. The following week was the Miami Federal Bar Association luncheon featuring Eleventh Circuit Court Judge Adalberto Jordan who spoke about his experiences doing pro bono cases when he was in private practice, and Third District Court of Appeal Judge Vance Salter, Judicial Chair of the Florida Bar Standing Committee on Pro Bono, and a recipient of the prestigious Tobias Simon Pro Bono Service Award, who spoke about the importance of taking pro bono cases.



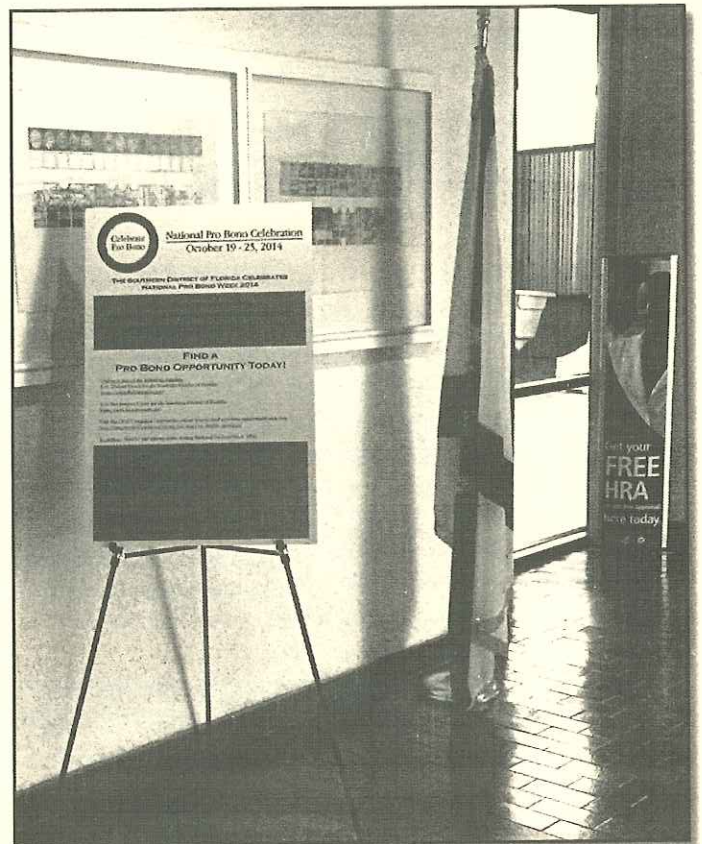
Eleventh Circuit Court Judge Adalberto Jordan and Third District Court of Appeal Judge Vance Salter speaking at the Miami-Dade Federal Bar Association luncheon on Oct. 15 about the importance of, and joy in taking, pro bono cases. Photo taken by Alejandro E. Castro, Jr.

The Thursday prior to the start of Pro Bono Week, the District Court and Bankruptcy Court sent out blast emails to all CM/ECF users reminding them about Pro Bono Week and directing them to the Courts' websites for more information. The Bankruptcy Court email blast warned recipients, "You DO NOT want to be caught during Pro Bono Week without a pro bono case!!! – Click here and discover the 'cure.'"

And there were the courts' websites. The District Court and the Bankruptcy Court each created a special Pro Bono Week link and page. The Pro Bono Week page had a copy of the poster, a copy of the calendar, a link to a message about pro bono from the President of the Florida Bar, Greg Coleman, links to different sources for pro bono referrals,

and honor rolls listing the names of all attorneys who took Bankruptcy pro bono referrals and those who took District Court pro bono referrals over the past year.

It was time for Pro Bono Week itself. We placed the posters in each of the Federal Courthouses located in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach and Ft. Pierce.



Pro Bono Week posters were placed in all federal courthouses in the Southern District of Florida.

We also had sign-up tables with the volunteer sign-up sheets at various locations during Pro Bono Week, including at all the Bankruptcy Courts and at the Miami Federal Bar Association's Friday night installation gala. Any lawyer that signed up on the volunteer list was given a sticker. In my courtroom, all lawyers wearing their "I signed up for Pro Bono today" sticker had their matter called first; on a calendar with 40 or 50 matters that makes a difference. (I noticed that after I started calling the "stickers" first, a few lawyers ran out to my lobby, where one of the sign-up tables was located, signed up for a case, got their sticker and ran back to "get in line.") We had volunteers sign up at every recruitment event that we had.

We also conducted Bankruptcy Pro Se Clinics in each of the Bankruptcy Courts and at a satellite location in

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Martin County. The Bankruptcy Bar actually conducts monthly Pro Se Clinics on a rotating basis in the three Bankruptcy courthouses throughout the year; this is a tremendous help to the Bankruptcy Court because the Southern District of Florida has the fifth highest number of pro se bankruptcy cases in the country. The Pro Se clinics are staffed by volunteer lawyers who spend two hours on a Friday meeting with pro se debtors, helping the debtors understand the bankruptcy process and their obligations as debtors.

All in all the celebration of Pro Bono Week 2014 in the Southern District of Florida was a tremendous success; we raised awareness, recruited many volunteers, provided lawyers with volunteer opportunities throughout the week and gave our bankruptcy court practitioners and our district court practitioners an opportunity to collaborate on what I hope is only the first of many pro bono events.

But pro bono isn't just Pro Bono Week. As the quotes at the opening of this article illustrate, pro bono is, and should be, an integral part of the service we provide to the public at large. Pro bono cases offer us not only the opportunity to meet our social responsibilities as professionals, but helping those who cannot help themselves is an incredibly rewarding experience. I took many pro bono cases before I went on the bench, and I never had a client as grateful as the ones whose \$2,000 financial crisis I solved (and I usually represented clients with many, many more zeroes in their financial crises).

Pro bono cases also provide an easy way to train young lawyers. Whether it is a small no asset bankruptcy case, giving a young associate the opportunity to learn about bankruptcy court or how to speak before a bankruptcy judge without throwing up, or a section 1983 action that gives a young lawyer incredible and significant litigation and trial training, no time is wasted on the case.



Leslie Cloyd and Ashley Dillman Bruce, bankruptcy attorneys at Berger Singerman, signing up volunteers at the Broward Federal Courthouse.

Every lawyer should take at least one pro bono case a year; and every law firm should have a formal pro bono policy in place. By providing a framework for pro bono service, young lawyers feel more comfortable taking a case. The Pro Bono Committee of the Business Law Section of the Florida Bar has developed a Pro Bono Policy Best Practices Guide. You can go to the Florida Bar Business Law section website – [www.flabizlaw.org](http://www.flabizlaw.org) – and download a copy.

Pro Bono Week 2014 was a wonderful experience, and I look forward to doing even more next year.

But don't wait for Pro Bono Week. As soon as you read this article, figure out where you can sign up for a pro bono case. Not only will you change the life of the person you help – you will change your life, too.

### Endnotes

- 1 Although this article focuses on Pro Bono Week events in the Southern District of Florida, all of the Eleventh Circuit was involved in Pro Bono Week with events taking place all over Florida, Alabama and Georgia.
- 2 Judge Isicoff is immediate past chair of the Public Outreach Committee of the National Conference of Bankruptcy Judges, which Committee includes in its mission statement an increase in public awareness of the need for, and importance of, pro bono service. Judge Isicoff is also Judicial Chair of the Pro Bono Committee of the Business Law Section of the Florida Bar, and is a member of the Florida Bar Standing Committee on Pro Bono as well as a member of the Pro Bono Committee of the American College of Bankruptcy.
- 3 You can view the different venues where Pro Bono Week was observed at the ABA website where you will find an interactive map that shows the various Pro Bono Week activities.
- 4 For a calendar of our District wide events, contact me and I will send you a copy. The calendar is too lengthy to attach to this article.
- 5 Sample sign-up sheets are available upon request.