

# THE GOOD FIGHT



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# IS GOOD BUSINESS

## By Ignacio Pinto-Leon

**E**l Santo (Spanish for “The Saint”) was Mexico’s most famous masked professional wrestler and one of its biggest cultural icons from his professional debut in the 1940s until his death in 1984. He was also a big movie and comics star, fighting against vampires, monsters, zombies, and foreign secret agents. The legend of El Santo is still alive in Mexico. Yet El Santo was no saint; he made his rivals suffer on the ring and in his movies and comics, and his character was often portrayed as a jet-setter living the nightlife.

Like El Santo, I am no saint. I am a solo practicing immigration and Mexican law in Houston, Texas. And although I performed many hours of pro bono work last year, it was not pure altruism. In the process of undertaking these many (*many*) hours of pro bono service, I received tangible and intangible benefits.

There are many reasons to do our share of work *pro bono publico* (for the good of the public): giving back to society, helping the needy, making an impact on the lives of the recipients of our pro bono efforts, and, in the words of Jack Eisenstein, a fellow member of the ABA’s SoloSez e-mail listserve, “that fuzzy feeling you get from helping people and using your skill set for the forces of good.”

I would add one more motivation to the list: It is good for business. And I don’t mean as a bragging tool (the way some

firms use it) but as a source of experience, networking, referrals, and goodwill among recipients of the pro bono service.

I do most of my pro bono work through the Consulate General of Mexico in Houston. I sometimes give workshops on immigration law to Mexican nationals on the premises of the Consulate, and I regularly offer legal orientation to the public (also in the Consulate building) on immigration and Mexican law matters. This commitment to the community serves my professional practice in several ways.

What do you get for your practice?

- **A source of referrals and goodwill.** Pro bono work is a great, free marketing tool. Pro bono clients generally are thankful for the attorney who listened to them and offered a piece of advice, and most of them will recommend you to family and acquaintances who need a lawyer.
- **Some paying clients.** Some of those who do not qualify for free representation under the guidelines of the host organization or need help beyond the scope of the pro bono service offered may retain your services.
- **Practice opportunities.** Some of the most challenging cases I had to study came from pro bono clients. On occasion, the complexity calls for study and creative thinking for finding a viable solution.
- **Access to more experienced attorneys.** It is likely that other lawyers working at the same or similar institution where you do your pro bono will be more than willing to share knowledge and advice. Consider it an informal pro bono mentor program. This may prove more valuable to new lawyers, but it is sure to be helpful to more seasoned attorneys as well.

Doing pro bono work is a win-win for all parties involved: The public gets

quality legal guidance from a committed professional; the host organization fulfills its goals; and we, the lawyers offering our time and talents, make a difference one client at a time.

Once you decide to do some type of pro bono work, how do you get started?

1. Define what type of pro bono service you would like to sign up for: a project directly in your practice area, one involving a type of law you may be interested in developing later, or even a collaboration in an area you had a passion for but never developed for varied reasons.
2. Research organizations in your area that regularly work with attorneys doing pro bono work: local bar associations, charities, law schools, NGOs. Then think outside the box (e.g., consulates are always in need of pro bono lawyers willing to assist their nationals). The ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service has an extensive state-by-state directory of pro bono programs (130 institutions were listed as of August 30, 2011; <http://tinyurl.com/probonopublic>).
3. Make a plan that includes an estimate of pro bono hours you are willing to put in. Do not overreach. Beyond all the positives of pro bono work, we still have to make a living.
4. Approach your target organization. Ask for its mission, rules and requirements, support, and expectations. Announce your goals and needs.
5. Start your pro bono service. Commit and deliver. Be ready to immerse yourself in a rewarding and enriching journey.

Pro bono work is good for the soul, good for business, good for society, and good for the recipient. And sainthood is not a requirement. **GPSOLO**

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