

High Integrity: The Pro Bono Partnership And GE

In light of the publication of Ben Heine-
man's book *High Performance With High
Integrity*, the Editor interviews **Rick
Hobish**, Executive Director of the *Pro
Bono Partnership*, about GE's work with
his organization.

By actively engaging and supporting
volunteers from corporate legal depart-
ments, the *Pro Bono Partnership* is the
leading provider of free business legal
services, educational workshops and
other legal resources to nonprofit commu-
nity-based organizations located in Fair-
field County and greater Hartford, Con-
necticut; the lower New York Hudson Val-
ley, including Westchester, Orange, Put-
nam and Rockland Counties; and New
Jersey.

**Editor: Why was the Pro Bono Partner-
ship founded and what was your role in
its inception?**

Hobish: In 1996 a group of lawyers from
the corporate bar of Westchester and Fair-
field Counties (WESFACCA) began
exploring the creation of a means for in-
house lawyers to give back to their com-
munities by providing pro bono services
to the thousands of not-for-profit organi-
zations located in Westchester and Fair-
field counties. That group was led by then
GE Corporate Counsel Bob Healing, who,
with the strong support of then GE Gen-
eral Counsel Ben Heine-
man, assembled a
leadership committee to spearhead the
creation of such an organization.

At that time, I was Deputy Director of
Lawyers Alliance for New York, and was
confident that a program designed to get
volunteer lawyers to use their existing
skill sets to provide non-litigation legal
services to nonprofit organizations could
work well for in-house counsel, as no
training would be required and the pro-
jects could be discrete and manageable.
When Bob approached me, the timing
could not have been better, as Lawyers
Alliance, only months before, had wisely
decided not to expand its programs to the
suburbs, since issues it faced in New York
City were both numerous and challenging.
The leadership committee possessed the
incredible commitment and drive needed
to give the Pro Bono Partnership the solid
infrastructure crucial to the success of any
organization. After more than a year of
planning, the leadership committee
embarked on an executive search and
hired me as Executive Director in late
1997.

**Editor: I understand you have several
offices today. How did they start?**

Hobish: In 1997, our office in Westches-
ter opened its doors, staffed only by Jes-
sica Markowitz, who is today our Director
of Finance and Administration, and me.
Approximately one year later Maurice
Segall joined; currently he serves as
Deputy Director overseeing the New York
and Connecticut programs. In 2000, a
group of corporate attorneys from some of
New Jersey's leading companies sought
us out to establish an office there. That
group included John Liftin, then General
Counsel of Prudential; John Sander, As-
sociate General Counsel of Schering
Plough; and Colleen Szuch, Honeywell's
Chief Intellectual Property Counsel, Spe-
cialty Materials.

Today, the Partnership operates
throughout the tri-state communities sur-

rounding New York
City. Our New Jersey
office is staffed by
two lawyers and an
administrative assis-
tant. Our office in
Westchester covers
New York's Hudson
Valley and Fairfield
County, Connecticut,
and has a staff of
seven, with three lawyers including
myself. And, several years ago we helped
establish a similar organization in Hart-
ford that has since joined us, becoming
part of the Pro Bono Partnership family.

In 2002, with leadership from Happy
Perkins (General Counsel of GE Energy),
and the efforts of Partnership Board mem-
ber Ivan Fong (then GE's Chief Intellec-
tual Property Officer) we worked with
general counsel and direct reports from
some of Atlanta's leading companies
(including GE, Coke, Delta and Cox) and
started the Pro Bono Partnership of
Atlanta, an independent 501(c)(3) organi-
zation that is thriving.

I should add here that one of the won-
derful things about this organization is
that once you get hooked, you don't want
to leave. As a result, I've had the privilege
of working with many members of the
Partnership's Board for several years,
including current Chairman John Liftin,
Board President, John Sander, and Bill
Ellis and Colleen Szuch, who remain two
of our most active board members. That
so many board members have been with
us for years speaks well for the Pro Bono
Partnership's professionalism and the
dedication of our board members.

**Editor: Can you tell us more about
what GE has done for the Partnership?**

Hobish: I strongly believe that without
GE, this organization never would have
been created, and without its continued
support, it would not exist today. Bob was
an inspirational moving force, and GE as
a company – especially its legal depart-
ment, under Brackett's and Ben's leader-
ship – has endorsed our work and put
itself on the line for us.

To this day, GE is our largest corporate
funder, and about 100 GE attorneys have
volunteered with us over the years on
approximately 160 matters, handling not
only small cases, but also matters that
require long term commitment. For
instance, when the Tarrytown YMCA,
was renovating 50 single residency occu-
pancy units, it was a huge job, with com-
plicated financing vehicles, and many bor-
rowers, each with their own contractual
requirements. GE's Jane Alpert, who has
extensive experience in tax-credit financ-
ing, volunteered to represent the YMCA
and enlisted one of GE's law firms (Paul
Hastings) to join in. Len Andrews, a
retired IBM attorney, who was then pres-
ident of the YMCA, estimates that between
GE and Paul Hastings, the YMCA
received upwards of \$250,000 worth of
legal services. That a lawyer in a cor-
porate legal department, where the value
on the shareholder dollar is of paramount
importance, would work so hard for us is
an extraordinary testament to GE's credo.
I am continually impressed with GE's
endorsement of pro bono work, which
enhances the company's stature in the
community, allows its lawyers to be pro-
fessionally enriched, and most important,



Rick Hobish

builds stronger communities.

**Editor: How does the Partnership go
about providing opportunities for cor-
porate counsel to use their corporate
law and transactional skills?**

Hobish: We have to work with both sides
of the partnership arrangement: on one
side, our clients – the nonprofits – and on
the other, our partners – corporate and law
firm counsel. For the clients, we work
closely with nonprofit leaders and famil-
iarize ourselves with the issues affecting
their communities. Our goal is to
strengthen the infrastructure of nonprofits
by providing free legal services of the
highest quality enabling them to make
wiser business and legal decisions. By
providing the legal services that they oth-
erwise couldn't afford, we help our clients
solve their legal issues and avoid a crisis
mode, thereby allowing them to work
more efficiently and preserve their limited
resources. The Partnership also runs
workshops for nonprofit executives, con-
ducted by our own attorneys and our vol-
unteers, including many from GE. These
workshops train nonprofit leaders on rele-
vant business and legal needs to arm them
with the ability to ask the right questions,
make better decisions and enlist our ser-
vices when needed.

In conducting outreach to volunteer
attorneys, we generally first seek the
endorsement of a company's general
counsel. In the case of GE, our longstand-
ing relationship with its leadership made
this easy. We then introduce ourselves to
the practice groups with presentations
about the Partnership. After a presenta-
tion, the general counsel or practice
group's leader and other interested attor-
neys will sign up, noting their areas of
expertise. From there we call volunteers
directly or send them our list of volunteer
opportunities. We always advise them that
a Partnership staff attorney is also
assigned to every matter to provide what-
ever backup and support is needed.

**Editor: How do organizations find out
about you?**

Hobish: In the beginning we looked to
umbrella groups such as United Ways,
community foundations, trade associa-
tions of nonprofits and local political lead-
ers to leverage their connections. We con-
tinue to work closely with such groups,
but also now benefit from an excellent
reputation and the word-of-mouth refer-
als it generates.

**Editor: How has your outreach to cor-
porate law departments developed
since the Partnership's founding?**

Hobish: As we've become better known
as a leader in the corporate pro bono cul-
ture, it has become easy to establish rela-
tionships with new corporations. Having
GE and other major companies put their
imprimatur on corporate pro bono legal
service has been of immense benefit,
encouraging other companies to partner
with us. Where we as an organization
have been particularly successful is in
developing a very clear understanding of
what volunteers hope to gain from work-
ing with the Pro Bono Partnership and
how to ensure that their experience with
us meets their expectations.

We put a lot of energy and effort into

making sure we provide ongoing support
in every matter we handle. Having said
that, there are many volunteers who by
virtue of their expertise require very little
of us. As for those brave enough to take on
something that stretches their professional
skills, we find them appreciative of our
assistance. In every case, we follow up at
least three times a year with the volunteer
attorneys to ascertain that the matter is
proceeding smoothly and that their expec-
tations have been met. Our ongoing sup-
port removes any perceived risks to vol-
unteering. For example, in the extreme
case, if a volunteer has an emergency at
work and cannot address the pro bono
matter on a timely basis, we will simply
give the matter to someone else or handle
it ourselves – and do so with a smile. We
will do whatever it takes to make sure the
experience is a positive one for our volun-
teers and our clients.

**Editor: How is GE involved at the
board and leadership levels?**

Hobish: GE's General Counsel Brackett
Denniston and senior labor and employ-
ment lawyer Mark Nordstrom, as well as
former GE General Counsel Ben Heine-
man, sit on our board of 19 – a large rep-
resentation, which demonstrates GE's
ongoing commitment to our organization.
The GE leadership always goes above and
beyond the call of duty, serving as our
finest good will ambassadors. I believe
they lead by example: they truly are
hands-on at the Partnership. We just pro-
duced a tenth anniversary video in which
Brackett encourages other corporations to
get involved by explaining the importance
of our work in supporting our commu-
nities and the value to in-house attorneys
who volunteer with us. GE has leveraged
its reputation and good deeds into support
from other corporations as well as law
firms. I am speaking here first and fore-
most about their support of our programs,
as is made evident by their numerous vol-
unteers. But their participation as our
most significant corporate financial sup-
porter has also set a standard for other cor-
porations, which is crucial in helping us
raise funds from other corporations, law
firms and foundations required to run our
organization. I would be remiss if I failed
to mention that there are many other cor-
porations that have played leadership
roles at the Partnership, partnering with us
and helping ensure our success.

**Editor: Where do you see the Pro Bono
Partnership headed in the next few
years?**

Hobish: We are a nationally recognized
model for the delivery of outstanding pro
bono services. The Board would like to
see the Partnership replicate our unique
and successful program in other areas of
the country by supporting the creation of
more offices as we did in Hartford and
Atlanta. At the same time we want to for-
tify and expand our local programs and
continue to improve the nature of the ser-
vices we provide to our neighbors in the
tri-state area. We have an amazing staff of
committed people and wonderful support
from GE and the many other corporations
and law firms that partner with us. I know
I speak for the Board and staff in stating
how much we are looking forward to
meeting the challenges of our second
decade of service to the community.

Please email the interviewee at rhobish@probonopartner.org with questions about this interview.