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Immigration, IP and Outreach Highlight Wyndham's Pro Bono Year

Charles Toutant, New Jersey Law Journal

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(L-R) Marc Merriweather, Carrie Weiner, Coleman Lechner, Jennifer Constantinou, Scott McLester, Betsy Feliciano, Jennifer Burns, Susan Crane. (Carmen Natale)

Among the pro bono highlights for the legal department of Wyndham Worldwide Corp. of Parsippany last year was the representation of unaccompanied minors in immigration court.

The department collaborated with KIND (Kids In Need of Defense), a nonprofit organization founded by actress Angelina Jolie and Microsoft Corp. seeking to address the unique protection needs of children who have been persecuted in their home countries, trafficked to the U.S., and abused, abandoned or neglected. KIND provides aid to children who are fleeing gangs, narcotics traffickers and other criminal groups in their home countries, including El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. In 2013, KIND recognized Wyndham as its Innovation Award corporate honoree.

Wyndham's attorneys, paralegals and administrative assistants took on representation of four children as a result of a program initiated by KIND in May 2015: "4 Before the 4th," which

encouraged its partners to take on four new clients before July 4th. Wyndham accepted the challenge, and has represented or is representing a total of 13 children through its partnership with KIND.

Representation by Wyndham's attorneys in the KIND cases has successfully resulted in the award of lawful permanency or green cards for a majority of its clients, according to the company.

In addition to KIND, the other primary focus of pro bono efforts by Wyndham's lawyers in 2015 was Pro Bono Partnership, a non-profit group that provides free business legal services, educational workshops and other resources to community-based non-profit organizations.

Susan Crane, Wyndham's group vice president for intellectual property, was honored by Pro Bono Partnership as one of its two New Jersey Volunteers of the Year for 2015. Crane was presented with the award in April of this year by Sandra Miniutti, vice president of marketing and chief financial officer for Charity Navigator, another pro bono client of Wyndham's attorneys.

Charity Navigator, a Glen Rock-based nonprofit evaluator of charities, sought assistance in registering its trademark in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, and Crane enlisted counsel in each of those places to provide their services registering the mark for free. Crane managed the process and succeeded in getting the mark registered in each of the three nations, according to the company.

Also in 2015, Wyndham's legal department continued its custom of partnering with NJ Law and Education Empowerment Project (NJ LEEP), a nonprofit that helps primarily minority high school students in Newark pursue an interest in legal careers and develop academic skills, life skills and preparation for college.

Wyndham hosted freshmen at its offices for a session in which the company's attorneys described the various types of in-house law. The students also worked with Wyndham attorneys to analyze a hypothetical legal case that was developed in-house.

The company also hosted four LEEP sophomores as interns during the summer, where they learned about various legal practice areas and participated in a mock debate on constitutional law. Wyndham also encouraged its outside counsel firms to host LEEP interns during the summer, and several students were hosted as a result.

Wyndham's general counsel, Scott McLester, met with LEEP seniors in May 2015 to discuss his own career path and provide advice as the seniors prepared to move on to college.

In addition, Wyndham joined with Prudential in 2015 to host a "meet and greet" session for prospective partners of NJ LEEP to learn more about the organization.

As for individual efforts in 2015, attorneys from Wyndham volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and Dress for Success during the year, and two attorneys volunteered at their local high school to assist a team of students competing in the New Jersey State Bar Foundation's Mock Trial Competition. Those students reached the Morris County finals in 2015.

Also, attorneys at Wyndham's Orlando office volunteered with Street Law, an outreach program for at-risk youth. They spent a day meeting with high school students, encouraging them to pursue a career in the law.

Wyndham formed its Pro Bono Committee in 2007 and gauged interest among legal staff for pro bono work by conducting a survey. In 2008 the company approved its "Pro Bono Policy," which memorializes the company's encouragement of attorneys, paralegals and legal administrative associates to provide pro bono services. The policy says pro bono services are consistent with the company's core values and therefore encouraged by the offices of the chairman, chief executive officer and general counsel.

Earlier this year, Wyndham awarded two attorneys, a paralegal and an administrative assistant, with the company's inaugural pro bono awards, covering work performed in 2015. The company also offers monthly gift cards to those who have pro bono engagements. •