
Pro Bono Spotlight

John David Semones

BY ERIK LINDAHL

For all of our colleagues, the pathway to law was personal and distinctive. Our profession is filled with unique backgrounds that shape careers. Pro bono service gives attorneys the chance to take advantage of these unique backgrounds and indulge their personal passions that existed before becoming an attorney. John David Semones is an excellent example of a North Carolina attorney who has, through pro bono service, brought his legal degree together with his passion for the environment.



John David Semones

In 1995, Semones received his Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from Davidson College. He spent the next eight years as a wildlife biologist specializing in endangered birds. As a wildlife biologist, Semones was able to spend significant time in exotic locations, including Alaska and Hawaii. In 2003, John David received his Master of Science in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation from the University of Florida, and decided to attend law school. Because of his predilection for all things environmental, Lewis and Clark Law School in Portland, Oregon was an obvious fit. As a law student at Lewis and Clark, Semones specialized in Environmental and Natural Resources Law.

After receiving his juris doctorate in 2006, he returned to Charlotte, a perfect middle ground for someone familiar with the climate

of both Alaska and Hawaii. Semones joined the firm of Katten Muchin Rosenman, LLP and currently maintains a commercial real estate finance practice. During his two years with the firm, Semones has enjoyed, and excelled at, his transactional real estate practice. Despite his career shift, Semones maintained a strong desire to stay involved with pressing environmental issues. Soon after beginning with the firm, he sought out pro bono opportunities in environmental law. His search began with the internet, where he discovered local environmental groups in Charlotte. Eventually, he met an assistant director with the Catawba Lands Conservancy. Soon thereafter, Semones became a member of the Conservancy's Lands Acquisition Committee and was well on his way to combining his passion and his law degree to support and conserve the environment.

The Catawba Lands Conservancy is a nonprofit land trust that seeks to preserve ecological diversity and water quality and combat rapid urbanization in the Southern Piedmont and Lower Catawba River Basin. The Conservancy works with private landowners through conservation easements, land donations, and land sales to reach its goals. Members of the Conservancy bring project ideas to Semones and his committee, and Semones must evaluate both the legal aspects and the fit of the particular land acquisitions with the Conservancy's mission. Semones asserts that his transactional real estate practice is essential to his pro bono

service; in fact, he could not serve the environment in this fashion without the knowledge that his practice at Katten has provided. He provides a range of legal work to the Conservancy, including assisting with legal documents, such as letters of intent to purchase property, and addressing easement issues related to property purchases. The amount of pro bono time invested varies with the needs of the Conservancy.

Many environmental groups ask their volunteers without specialized backgrounds to assist with field work; for example, a land conservancy may require volunteers to monitor and maintain property. Semones' ecology and conservation background, coupled with his current practice as a real estate attorney, make him an invaluable asset to the Catawba Lands Conservancy. Because, as Semones has experienced, so much of North Carolina is now interested in "going green," opportunities are opening up for other attorneys interested in environmental pro bono work. Semones stressed that attorneys with a litigation background will find the most substantive work in the area of environmental justice. To that end, projects may be available through the Environmental Pro Bono Committee, a project of the NCBA Environmental Law Section. Another source is the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC), which has utilized the resources of North Carolina law firms to assist with special environmental pro bono projects. Derb Carter, SELC's director for its Carolinas office, says that there is "no shortage" of

upcoming environmental projects that the office could use help on.

Ultimately, the most successful pro bono attorneys are those who are truly committed to the cause. A background like his is not a prerequisite to environmental pro bono serv-

ice, but his education and experience are hallmarks of his passion. Semones is an excellent example of how the combination of legal talent and passion can be beneficial both to the attorney and to the cause to which that attorney devotes his or her time. ■

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