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A helping hand in an unlikely place

Katten honored for law clinic at school in Humboldt Park

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On the third Wednesday of every month during the school year, the basement of Jose de Diego Community Academy gets transformed into a fully functioning law office.

The public elementary school in Humboldt Park has a team of lawyers from Katten, Muchin, Rosenman LLP, along with attorneys from the Legal Assistance Foundation, run a clinic for neighborhood residents.

And they do it all for free.

Katten launched the pro bono venture in April 2013. In its first year, it helped more than 60 people.

Once a month, Katten sends at least four attorneys to work with the residents. Those interested schedule an appointment or walk in.

The spectrum of legal issues include landlord-tenant disputes, housing matters, wills, expungements and consumer and family law.

A portion of the school basement was remodeled into a full-fledged law office, complete with a reception area, interview rooms and a library of legal guides.

"We essentially have a mini-law library at the clinic because we have lawyers from a large law

firm who don't normally work with divorce cases or similar matters," said Jonathan K. Baum, Katten's director of pro bono services.

"The infrastructure is challenging, but it's incredibly rewarding."

In addition to venturing into less familiar areas of law, Katten associate Elizabeth Hermann Smith said the clinic work is a distinct change of pace from her usual duties in the commercial finance department.

"It's very different to sit down with a person who's bringing to you some personal issue, often something they've had going on for years," she said.

"Even if, ultimately, you're not able to represent them or they don't choose to go with that option, often you are the first person who knows or is able to figure out what options are available to them. ... It's satisfying in a very different way than talking through comments on a loan agreement with your clients."

The relationship between Katten and Jose de Diego also extends beyond the legal clinic.

Katten has staged a mock trial as part of the Lawyers in the Classroom program, tutored and mentored students through a book club program, sponsored book and school supply drives, served as judges in the school science fair and helped repaint classrooms.

"The firm is not only focused on 'What legal services can we provide?' but also just 'What else can we do to help to the school and get involved in the community?'" Smith said.



Jonathan K. Baum

The Jose de Diego clinic is the first of its kind in Chicago, and Baum said it is one of the first in the country to provide free legal services in a public school.

Last month, the National Legal Aid & Defender Association (NLADA) recognized Katten for its pro bono work at the Jose de Diego clinic with its 2014 Beacon of Justice Award.

The Jose de Diego clinic was the only Chicago-based project honored by the NLADA.

The organization also recognized seven other law firms with offices in Chicago for their pro bono work in other parts of the country. They are:

- Dechert LLP, for creating specialized pro bono practice groups across the country.
- DLA Piper, for its development of legal aid clinics with corporate clients throughout the country.
- Kaye, Scholer LLP, for its work on the Small Business Legal Academy in New York City.

- Kirkland & Ellis LLP, for its Jeremiah's Circle of Friends legal aid clinic in Washington, D.C.

- Locke, Lord LLP, for its pro bono work that helped pass the Michael Morton Act in Texas, which requires prosecutors to hand over all evidence to defense attorneys in criminal cases.

- Polsinelli P.C., for its work in gaining the release of a wrongfully convicted Arizona man after 40 years in prison and its program that provides free legal services to low-income individuals in Arizona.

- Quarles & Brady LLP, for its Lawyer for a Day representation project in Milwaukee County's domestic abuse injunction court.

Katten also credits LAF for helping to make its clinic possible.

"When we interview people at the clinic, there are attorneys from LAF who are there and available to help answer our questions, help us assess the situation and help us determine the specific advice to give," said Kimberly A. Beis, a Katten attorney in the intellectual property department.

And just listening to the clients helps the lawyers plot a course to take.

"The clients who come into the clinic are so appreciative of someone that is really interested in listening to them and really trying to help them," she said.

"We work at the clinic because we want to, because we care. Sometimes we are the first person that has really listened to what it is they are trying to accomplish or the problems that they have."