

Judge From the Big Easy Seeks HELP Volunteers in the Big Apple

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One day in New Orleans, attorney Conrad S.P. "Duke" Williams III contacted his colleague Val Patrick Exnicios and passed along an unusual request from Judge Jay C. Zainey of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana: Would the two hotshot Big Easy trial lawyers kindly report to a local homeless shelter and dispense free advice for its down-and-out denizens?

To an audience of New York attorneys and law students gathered Wednesday at the Feerick Center for Social Justice and Dispute Resolution at Fordham University School of Law, Mr. Exnicios explained his initial reaction to Judge Zainey's request.

"So I said to Duke, 'What? I'm supposed to go see a bunch of bums?' I thought anybody could get a job in this great country of ours. Oh, I was an ignorant lawyer I was!"

This happened to Mr. Exnicios before Hurricane Katrina decimated his city and destroyed his own home and law office.

Judge Zainey had already seen how hurricanes of many varieties can blow people into unlikely tailspins, often resulting in homelessness. It was why he established a growing pro bono movement he named HELP - for Homeless Experience Legal Protection.

And it was why Judge Zainey traveled to Manhattan on Wednesday - to enlist New Yorkers in his cause and to thank the roughly 100 lawyers from Citigroup and seven private firms already signed on for duty. On hand to show support for their colleague on the federal bench were Southern District Judges Paul Crotty and John F. Keenan.

Mr. Exnicios continued with his testimony, "As we trial lawyers are somewhat reluctant to ignore requests from members of the bench, I submitted to Judge Zainey. And what do you know - it wasn't some amorphous group of bums I met, but individual persons who told me their stories. I talked to the type of people I'd avoid in the streets because they smelled bad.

"I'd sit there with a fellow all downcast as he talked," said Mr. Exnicios. "But when he left, after I'd helped him for awhile, his shoulders were squared back and he thanked me. All of a sudden, I went from being an ignorant lawyer to being a knowledgeable lawyer."

Mr. Exnicios' friend and colleague ex-Navv pilot Duke Williams whose pro bono

...with families, friends and colleagues, on many pro bono programs. Judge Zainey's specialty through HELP is assisting down-and-out veterans, added an amen.

"This work you can do, too, it keeps your practice in context," he said.

Judge Zainey is accustomed to hearing such testimony from lawyers he wrangles into HELP from his home base in New Orleans, and now spread to the Louisiana cities of Shreveport and Baton Rouge - as well as to New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Houston, Denver, Washington, D.C., Bloomington, Ind., Virginia Beach, Va., and Lubbock, Texas.

"After I'd been appointed to the federal bench [by President George H.W. Bush], I started going with a local group to help out in a New Orleans soup kitchen," said Judge Zainey, a past president of the Louisiana Bar Association. "Well, I figured anybody could do that. Maybe we lawyers should do something more with our special abilities."

Then along came Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, a disaster that wiped out many homeless shelters in New Orleans, and along with them the few possessions and vital documents of the city's tens of thousands of poor people.

Suddenly, a small army of destitute men and women whose special identification cards were their "lifelines," as Judge Zainey put it, were caught up in the peculiar drudgery of being poor. This is not to mention a whole new army of homeless still now living in cramped trailer parks administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"Can you imagine losing that ID card?" said Judge Zainey. "You can't get a job, you can't get Social Security, you can get services of any kind - you can't even get a night at a homeless shelter. And it takes 30 days to get that card replaced."

One of the first things HELP did was to establish a system whereby notarized copies of special identification cards would be kept on file by homeless shelters.

The judge reminded lawyers at the Feerick Center, "You're all very powerful people. Even if you don't strictly address legal issues with [homeless people], the fact that you're a powerful lawyer listening to poor people, giving them dignity - it means a lot."

Besides house counsel at Citigroup, law firms participating in the New York branch of HELP are Proskauer Rose; Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton; Shearman & Sterling; Dechert; Reed Smith; O'Melveny & Myers; and Segal McCambridge Singer & Mahoney.

The Feerick Center coordinates pro bono training for volunteer lawyers on issues that include Social Security benefits, immigration matters and housing rights.

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