

# Finding Meaning Through Volunteering

By Melanie Gray

The year 1998 transformed my practice and my life. I had been practicing for 17 years and was a partner in a top-tier national law firm. I had three growing children and a fulfilling marriage. But work was slow. I don't know about you, but I'm miserable when work is slow. I believe in the old adage, "If you want to get something done, give it to a busy person." When I'm slow at work, I get next to nothing done, but give me more than I should be able to handle and then I thrive. So when work slowed for me in 1998, despite all my good fortune, I was unhappy. (Although I'm sure some of you are questioning my priorities and perspective, I believe that many may relate to this feeling).

Then a wonderful opportunity came along: I was asked to join the board of a new affiliate of Girls Inc. in Houston. This fledgling organization was experiencing growing pains, losing first its Executive Director and, soon after, its Board Chair. So, just three months into my appointment, I was asked to become Board Chair. I was taken aback by the suggestion, given my limited experience with nonprofits, but I was unable to resist the challenge. Thank God for Girls Inc. of Greater Houston, as it gave me a mission: to take the organization to the next level – everything from improving its structure to increasing fundraising ten-fold.

1998 introduced me to the challenge and reward of participation in nonprofits. After Girls Inc. of Greater Houston, I joined the board of my children's Montessori school (which I now chair). Since then, I have joined the Board of Houston's Society of Performing Arts, become an Executive Committee member of Syracuse University College of Law's advisory board, a Trustee of Syracuse University and a board member of Planned Parenthood of Southeast Texas (for which I chair its \$20 million capital campaign).

While it hasn't always been pretty, I haven't dropped a ball yet. Despite those times when I ask myself, "What am I

doing?" I've seen innumerable benefits from my various roles. As a mother, I am teaching my kids by example that hard work is rewarding in and of itself, and my children have also benefited from organizations in which I am involved. They have embraced the values that I hold and that these organizations represent. When I was struggling with whether to take on the role of capital campaign chair for Planned Parenthood, and finally decided I could and should, my 17-year old son exclaimed – and I do mean exclaimed — "YES!" When I asked why he was so excited, he said because it is such an important organization that serves so many women in need. My commitment to their schools and mine underscores the importance that I place on education. I know my children are learning by example that giving back is one of the most important things you can do with your life.

*Things getting slow? Try volunteering for not-for-profit organizations. You may even get some business out of it.*

I've also witnessed the benefits that connecting with the community and networking has for one's practice. Another practicing lawyer, close friend, and wife of the general counsel of a major Fortune 500 company in Houston worked with me on the Board of Girls, Inc. She saw me in action and told her husband that his company was missing out in not giving me some work. While at first I received only a few relatively modest cases, that opening resulted in a call in late 2001 from Enron in connection with their financial implosion. Since then, I've been one of the lead attorneys in Enron's chapter 11 case. I firmly believe in the saying that "you never

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know where your next client is going to come from.”

I give eternal thanks to my firm; it truly values community contributions and lends its support, both financially and by encouraging its lawyers and staff to stay involved in the community. I am even more thankful to my family, who accept that I am not happy without being fully occupied.

There has been much talk about balance and what it means. I'm concerned that for many attorneys, but especially for younger women joining the profession, balance sometimes means holding back from being fully occupied. While everyone must make her own choices, I encourage those who find themselves restless when not fully engaged to look beyond their jobs and families for other causes that mean something to them, and then to roll up their sleeves. For me, the slow period in 1998 was a dark cloud hanging over me – what I found was a most amazing sliver lining that has brought depth and incredible gratification to my life.



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Bankruptcy Litigation practice, Ms. Gray specializes as a commercial litigator with particular expertise in complex litigation in bankruptcy cases. Over the past few years, Ms. Gray has been deeply involved in the firm's representation of Enron in its bankruptcy proceedings, the most complex Chapter 11 case ever.

As a result of her professional achievements and community commitment, Ms. Gray was recognized as one of ten Houston "Woman on the Move" by Texas Executive Women in 2001, and as a Women Achiever by the YWCA of New York City in 2004. Ms. Gray has three children and is married to another trial attorney in Houston.