Growing a *Pro Bono* Culture in Singapore’s Legal Profession: An update from the Law Society of Singapore

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1. Introduction

One memorable reference from pop culture states that: “If you are good at something, never do it for free.” Fortunately, even in the capitalistic society we live in, no one will take that advice seriously unless he is a sociopath. It is therefore reasonable to assume that no sociopath exists in the legal industry, where the value of providing good quality, free or subsidised legal help to needy persons (otherwise called *pro bono* work) is indisputable.

Singapore’s commitment to *pro bono* was affirmed as early as 1956, when Parliament discussed the need for an improved legal aid scheme. More than five decades later, a range of organisations and agencies run legal aid and *pro bono* advice schemes. They fall under three broad headings: those run by (1) the Law Society, (2) the Government and (3) other agencies.

The Government traditionally provides civil legal aid through the Legal Aid Bureau and representation for persons charged with committing offences which carry the death penalty. The Law Society provides criminal legal aid for most offences through its Criminal Legal Aid Scheme. Additionally, the Association of Criminal Lawyers of Singapore runs a programme which takes on cases referred to it by the Community Court without the application of any formal means test.

I will not be able to delve into the mechanisms (e.g. their scope and thresholds of qualification) of each of the schemes. There is much literature on them. One of the most

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1 The writer is much indebted to Evans Ng, a practice trainee who helped in the preparation of this article.
2 *The Dark Knight* (2008), quote from the Joker.
accessible pieces is the Law Society’s *Pro Bono* Guide which I commend for its conciseness. Instead, my article will describe the recent efforts of the Law Society to foster a *pro bono* culture in Singapore.

2. The 2006 review by the Legal Aid Review Committee

In 2006, the Law Society established the Legal Aid Review Committee. This Committee undertook a comprehensive review of the provision of legal aid in Singapore and produced a report (“the 2006 Report”) which recommended improvements to the *pro bono* services then available. Whilst the 2006 Report neither suggests that legal services in Singapore are generally unaffordable nor that the legal fees need to be revised downwards, the Committee felt that “basic legal services are not within the reach of the poor when their income levels are so low that they are hard put to meet their basic needs.” The primary concern of the 2006 Report was therefore to ensure that there is access to justice for the poor.

The Committee thought that this concern could be addressed in two main ways, namely, (1) to encourage every lawyer to pledge 25 hours of their services annually to *pro bono* work; and (2) by establishing a *pro bono* services office to coordinate all *pro bono* initiatives of the Law Society.

Both of these recommendations were adopted by the Law Society in the subsequent year. It recognised that with over 3,500 Singapore lawyers, a successful implementation of the 25-hour pledge will create a bank of 87,500 hours per year. With respect to the other recommendation, the Law Society established the *Pro Bono* Services Office (PBSO) on 1 August 2007 which was opened by then Senior Minister of State for Law, Associate Professor Ho Peng Kee. The PBSO aims not only to manage all of the Law Society’s *pro bono* initiatives but also to bolster volunteerism rates.

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4 A copy of the 2006 Report may be obtained from the Law Society upon request. The Legal Aid Committee which produced the 2006 Report comprised Mr Jimmy Yim, SC (Co-Chairperson), Ms Malathi Das (Co-Chairperson and Vice President of Council), Mr Yap Teong Liang (Vice President of Council), Mr Sean La’Brooy, Mr Gopinath Pillai, Mr Rajan Chettiar (Council Member), A/P Debbie Ong, Dr Myrna Blake, Ms Sudha Nair and Secretariat Ms Rajvant Kaur.
5 The 2006 Report, para 1.1.
6 See also Annexes A and B for the personal perspectives of Ms Malathi Das and Mr Lim Tanguy on their involvement with the PBSO and more generally, the *pro bono* initiatives in Singapore. See in particular Ms Das’s comments that “it was felt that it was timely that the various *pro bono* initiatives be streamlined in a meaningful way with a central co-ordinating agency which would be able to manage resources efficiently. This culminated in the establishment of the *Pro Bono* Services Office of the Law Society.”
Since its inception, the PBSO has been well-supported by the Ministry of Law, the Singapore Academy of Law, the Subordinate Courts, the Singapore Institute of Legal Education and other community partners that share its vision of enabling access to justice for all.

3. Some early fruits of the Pro Bono Services Office

The PBSO’s initiatives concentrate on three strategic areas: (1) creation of programmes; (2) volunteer recruitment and mobilisation to sustain the programmes; and (3) coordination with other agencies in the legal landscape to ensure an integrated approach.

i. Categories of programmes

The PBSO currently runs three categories of programmes, namely, those for (1) individuals; (2) community-serving organisations; and (3) the community at large.

Programmes targeted at helping individuals consist of the Community Legal Clinics (CLCs), the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme and the Ad Hoc Pro Bono Referral Scheme. The Criminal Legal Aid Scheme offers legal representation for accused persons regardless of nationality, who claim trial for certain criminal offences. The Ad Hoc Pro Bono Referral Scheme offers legal representation for accused persons in exceptional circumstances who do not meet the criteria for existing aid schemes but are nonetheless in urgent need.

The CLCs deserve special mention. They offer free basic legal advice to Singaporeans and Permanent Residents who face legal issues on personal matters. Appeals for pro bono programmes used to be directed at individual lawyers. The CLCs, however, provided an opportunity to engage law firms instead of individual volunteers. Because the CLCs were intended to run four nights a week, it required volunteers on a large scale. The PBSO invited the twenty largest firms to volunteer their lawyers for one clinic session per month. By engaging law firms instead of individual lawyers, the pro bono commitment will originate from the firm’s leadership and signal the importance of pro bono engagement for the entire firm instead of at an individual level.

The PBSO’s effort was amply rewarded with the near uniform support of the law firms, and the CLCs continue to date as one of the most successful of the Law Society’s pro bono programmes. Public demand for the service remains high. From 1 October 2010 to 31 March 2011, 1444 persons have registered for the clinics. Of these, 1053 received legal advice
from the volunteer lawyers. The average waiting time remains at one to two weeks, with
spikes in demand met by scheduling more lawyers.

Recognising that community-serving organisations are often run on limited resources and
cannot afford legal consultation, the PBSO administers two schemes for community-serving
organisations which are the Community Organisation Legal Clinic and Project Law Help. The
Community Organisation Legal Clinic offers free basic legal advice on operational issues for
charities, voluntary welfare organisations, non-profit organisations and social enterprises
which have a goal to meet community needs. Project Law Help matches eligible
organisations with a volunteer law practice to provide more in-depth non-litigation
commercial legal advice.

The Law Society also builds legal resources for community-serving organisations. It recently
developed a legal information online portal for these organisations which will be launched in
the first half of 2012. The portal provides basic information on the various laws and
compliance requirements for running such organisations.

For the community at large, the PSB supports “Law Awareness” which is a project to raise
public awareness of the law via seminars, exhibitions and publications of educational
information. The Law Society’s Law Awareness Committee launches a new public education
initiative biannually. Last year, Law Awareness worked on a project which raised awareness
of eldercare related legal matters and legal issues surrounding death. That project entitled
“Law Cares” simultaneously established a platform to collate research on the common types
of legal issues which confront the elderly. It also sought to connect volunteer lawyers and
law students with voluntary welfare organisations which provide elderly care in the interest of
fostering pro bono collaboration.

**ii. Coordination of pro bono initiatives**

Another strategy of the PBSO is to streamline the approach to participating in pro bono
services. The PBSO has developed three modes of coordination between the Law Society,
the judiciary and other agencies which provide pro bono services. The first mode involves a
formal collaboration through which the Law Society supports the pro bono initiatives of other
organisations with a commitment of manpower and other institutional resources. The second
mode is to share expertise with other agencies seeking to start or develop pro bono
programmes. The third is to channel volunteers to assist organisations with their programs.
The PBSO also assists agencies in recruiting volunteers by publicising *pro bono* opportunities with these agencies to Law Society members. An instance of such joint efforts is the establishment of the Joint International *Pro Bono* Committee. This initiative of a group of international and Singapore law practices is supported by the Law Society. The Joint International *Pro Bono* Committee aims to match interested Singapore and international law practices with cross-border *pro bono* opportunities involving economic and social development in emerging markets. As non-governmental organisations become engaged in sophisticated efforts to address global challenges, there is a growing need for high-end legal, accounting and financial advisory service to support such efforts. The Joint International *Pro Bono* Committee aims to provide a pool of law firms with international legal experience willing to share their expertise on a *pro bono* basis.

Another example occurs where the PBSO acts as a coordinating agency for the Small Claims Tribunal Volunteer Referee Scheme which trains and gazettes volunteer lawyers as volunteer referees on an annual basis. The PBSO has also started to support the Supreme Court Legal Aid Scheme for Capital Offences (LASCO) in ways that I elaborate upon below.

**iii. Volunteer recruitment and mobilisation**

There can be no doubt that enhancing the spirit of volunteerism amongst lawyers for *pro bono* work is the key to sustainability for all such ventures. The objective is to enhance volunteerism through fostering and nurturing this as a fundamental value to be lauded and embraced by every lawyer. The PBSO therefore supports its volunteers (both lawyers and law students) through programmes and with the over-arching goal of making their experience as meaningful and seamless as possible.

For volunteer lawyers, the PBSO has five supporting schemes which targets different volunteer profiles. First, there is the Ad Hoc *Pro Bono* Assessment Scheme which matches practitioners to ad hoc *pro bono* work. Secondly, the Mentor/Specialist Resource programme provides mentorship to fresh volunteers and a specialist resource scheme for queries by volunteers on practice areas. Thirdly, there is the Knowledge Database Contributor scheme which provides paralegal support and information resources for volunteers or *pro bono* initiatives. The fourth scheme is the Volunteer Initiative Support scheme, which assists practitioners undertaking similar *pro bono* work to form groups. Finally, the PBSO also runs the Social Service Agency Referral scheme because practitioners often wish to do more for clients who are from dysfunctional backgrounds.
To enhance recruitment and mobilisation, the Law Society is creating an online portal for volunteers that will provide long-term to one-off volunteering opportunities through the Law Society or other organisations. This portal will facilitate volunteer networking and the development of ideas to address gaps and needs in the legal assistance framework. It will be launched in the first half of this year.

4. Continuous improvement to existing programmes

Programmes are frequently improved to meet actual needs on the ground. The PBSO has forged close ties with key organisations in the social service sector including the National Council of Social Services (the umbrella organisation for voluntary welfare organisations) and Family Service Centres. These ties led to the creation of a referral protocol for social workers to have priority in referring their impecunious clients for legal advice, legal clinics for community-serving organisations, and the better design of Law Awareness projects. The expertise gained from running the CLCs have also allowed the PBSO to set up specialist criminal and family legal clinics in collaboration with the Subordinate Courts.

The PBSO produces a half yearly status report on the Law Society’s pro bono initiatives. Improvements to existing schemes are also noted in the status report. For example, the Law Society has worked with the Supreme Court Registry in making structural changes to LASCO in order to improve the quality of representation in capital cases. A LASCO Selection Panel has been constituted, whose members include Senior Counsel, representatives from the Supreme Court Registry and members of the Criminal Bar, to provide a more rigorous emplacement and assignment process for counsel to lead in LASCO matters. This Panel will bring greater accountability to the process. It will also receive feedback on assigned counsel and implement programmes for the benefit of LASCO counsel.

Significantly, the Law Society is working towards the creation of a framework to mobilise and train a consolidated pool of volunteers to support all criminal legal aid initiatives. This avoids the replication of volunteer mobilisation and training efforts caused by separate pools of criminal legal aid volunteers. It also allows the tracking of the criminal practice experience and training of criminal legal aid volunteers; accurate monitoring of volunteer workload; and ease of introducing volunteer pool quality controls to ensure that criminal legal aid assignments are consonant with the assigned volunteer’s experience.

5. Nudging lawyers to participate in pro bono work
After we have had some time to appraise the conditions in Singapore, there appears three main ways by which we can grow volunteerism rates and put the supply of services *pro bono* on a steadier footing.

First, we must identify and speak to the various motivations to perform *pro bono* work. It is unrealistic to expect all lawyers to provide *pro bono* services out of purely altruistic reasons. At the same time, it is not inconsistent with altruism for a lawyer to render *pro bono* aid as a way to develop his own professional skills and strengthen his practice. We should not only speak to the exemplary volunteer lawyers. We should also discover from those who do not volunteer their reasons for non-participation.

Secondly, we must assess the efficacy of different types of invitations to participate. I noted in the June 2011 issue of the Law Gazette that “whilst it is true that more members [of the Law Society] are coming forward to serve on various *pro bono* projects, a good number ... have never seriously considered personal participation in any of the initiatives.”

The advocacy for *pro bono* work may be framed subliminally and effectively. In an effort to obtain information on the *pro bono* commitment of members, the Law Society has included since 2010 a non-mandatory section requesting members who renew their practising certificates to state their *pro bono* involvement of the previous year. Based on two years’ information, there is an increase in both the response rates (from 96% to 99.4%) and favourable responses (9.6 hours to 12.0 hours). This is a pleasant but unsurprising fact. People often pick up cues about desirable behaviour from their reference groups, and lawyers are no different. The renewal forms suggest to them the prevalence of volunteerism. And if they perceive the norms of participation as “more often than not”, they will naturally gravitate there.

Law practices can be persuaded to take a “*pro bono* friendly” posture too. To this end, the PSBO is developing a “*Pro Bono* Friendly” certification scheme for law practices. This will consist of an annual assessment of a practice’s *pro bono* contributions and support for its volunteer lawyers. Some parameters which will be assessed include the total number of hours expended by the practice on *pro bono* work per year, the *pro bono* programmes the practice supports, the strength of internal programmes/initiatives to encourage *pro bono* participation/recognition of volunteer lawyers and financial contributions made to support *pro bono* schemes. A threshold will be set to qualify as a “*Pro Bono* friendly firm”.

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7 See annex C. for the full address in the June 2011 issue of The Law Gazette.
Thirdly, we must inculcate in law students the value of pro bono work. A paradigm shift will be more probable if we win the minds and hearts of entire generations of new lawyers who are more idealistic by nature. Hence the opportunities for law students to participate in pro bono work will be markedly increased. The SILE has proposed a pro bono programme for undergraduates from 2013. And our two law schools have obliged. The SILE and the SAL will fund this project for three years. Foreign qualified students will also have to complete pro bono modules as part of the Bar course.

I believe that these methods will pave the gradual movement of pro bono efforts away from ad hoc invitations to participate towards a more stable and institutionalised setting.

6. Conclusion: possibilities for the future

Despite the great strides made by the PBSO and various stakeholders in the legal profession, the pro bono landscape in Singapore is still in its nascent stages. The Law Society hopes all lawyers here will eventually be persuaded to the view that helping others in a professional capacity is an integral part of their professional identity. It is, however, anybody’s guess how long this is going to take.

And it is not just inertia that we are battling, otherwise a huge launch event to promote pro bono or the imposition of rules requiring a minimum pro bono commitment from every lawyer may just do the trick. It is perhaps more fundamental than that. Many lawyers in Singapore simply do not know there is a serious pro bono culture that is alive and kicking (though still in its infancy) and they do not know how they can be part of that.

Talking about how to do good and how important it is for lawyers to do good is the first but a crucial step towards creating a truly giving profession. When lawyers begin to realise that many other lawyers are serious, not just in the business of law, but also in helping others gain access to justice, they will similarly be influenced.

When the message of need reaches the ears of more lawyers, we can be assured that many more hearts will be touched (as emerging statistics testifying to increased pro bono involvement show) which will in turn move hands and feet to compassionate and generous action. When that happens on a larger scale and on a sustained level across the profession, the quote of the Joker at the start of this paper will cease to have any attraction for the serious and genuine practitioner. Rather, it will be these words from Winston Churchill, as
quoted by Ms Malathi Das, that will resonate, “We make a living from what we get. We make a life from what we give.”

`We make a living from what we get. We make a life from what we give.' - Winston Churchill

In 2006, the Law Society of Singapore undertook and produced a report on the state of legal aid in Singapore. Following from the report was a recommendation that every practicing lawyer undertake at least 25 hours of pro bono work a year.

The recommendation was made not because lawyers in Singapore did not do pro bono work. Many already did so – and well in excess of 25 hours a year - through existing schemes. However, it was felt that it was timely that the various pro bono initiatives be streamlined in a meaningful way with a central co-ordinating agency which would be able to manage resources efficiently. This culminated in the establishment of the Pro Bono Services Office of the Law Society.

The aim of this initiative was also to meet head-on reasons previously given for not doing pro bono work – time, support from managing partners and challenges posed by specialized practices.

Six years on, it is with great pride that we see pro bono work continuing to grow from strength to strength. At this year’s Opening of Legal Year, the Honourable the Chief Justice, the Attorney-General and the President of the Law Society all spoke of pro bono work during their annual address to the legal community. Whilst much more can be done, we have also come a long way as a result of the support and synergy amongst the various stakeholders of the legal community. Pro bono is the one issue on which everybody is looking in the same direction.

The best reasons why pro bono not only benefits the community, but also us as lawyers cannot be disputed.

Firstly, it provides exposure to a variety of work that will not be duplicated in our practice. Pro bono work opens a different world of opportunity for the specialists amongst us or young lawyers who are unlikely to experience or venture to the same level of responsibility. Pro bono cases directly impact people’s lives in a meaningful and lasting way.

Pro bono clients simply need a lawyer to evaluate their legal rights and present their case and as lawyers, we possess the necessary training and skills to quickly evaluate a problem, work out a solution in a systematic and coherent way, and generally communicate that plan of action to a lay-person intelligibly. More often than not, we can make a quick assessment of issues in a matter of minutes. Occasionally, we may be stumped, but it is nothing that a bit of research cannot overcome.

Not having enough time is a convenient excuse not to take on pro bono work, but in reality, they are not big consumers of our time. Most pro bono matters do not present complex legal or factual issues and require a minimal amount of actual time. So while paying big dividends to our professional experience, especially to younger members, the investment which we or our firm makes is relatively small.

There are, of course, exceptions to this statement when we accept a novel or more complex matter. But in such cases, we generally know what lies ahead and for those who choose to take these cases, the rewards multiply accordingly.

Pro bono cases also sharpen our negotiating skills since they often are used in the most difficult of circumstances. We learn how far we can go and still cut the best deal for our client. Such skills, honed by less experienced lawyers in the pro bono context will prepare us for work for paying clients. Our negotiation capability can also get a substantial workout in most types of community legal work - whether sitting on a non-profit board or negotiating contracts for a charitable organization.

We also play a part in helping the layperson overcome an intrinsic mistrust of the legal system and of lawyers. We learn to leave behind legal jargon and relearn how to phrase questions to the client to elicit the most information in the shortest amount of time. Pro bono cases present novel challenges in accomplishing seemingly simple tasks such as form-filling. We learn to become more efficient at taking instructions, obtaining documents, arranging meeting times, and fostering an atmosphere of cooperation.
Doing pro bono work exercises one's common sense. Figuring out how to help someone whose predicament may have been occasioned by bad prioritizing or the lack of real choices, and then finding a creative solution, factor enormously in pro bono work. Creativity is a lawyer's most powerful tool. Accurate information is something any lawyer, with some effort, can obtain. Creativity, in terms of addressing legal issues, finding novel resolutions, and handling situations we address every day must be developed and pro bono cases offer real opportunities for this professional growth.

One of the attractions of joining a profession is that it is not just about learning to do a job. Lawyers become community leaders because we understand the legal and law enforcement systems from a unique standpoint. We can identify issues and assist our families, friends, neighbours, and communities in avoiding unpleasant experiences with those systems.

In most litigation, the playing field is never quite a level one, but the tilt in the balance is never more pronounced as in pro bono cases. Doing pro bono work serves to remind us why we became lawyers. By doing pro bono and public service, we are serving as a role model: for our children, for our community, and for the profession.

In commercial litigation, the legal system often serves a dispute resolution function, but pro bono work implicates the very foundational tenets that the legal system was designed for - to vindicate rights and protect the disadvantaged.

Finally, there's that appreciation thing. A paying client's expectations result from the fee he pays us. For a pro bono client, there is really nothing but our own commitment to her cause that keeps her from losing hope.

Our legal education has given us the opportunity to contribute to our community. Pro bono work is a realization of that opportunity and an expression of that commitment.
Annex B: The personal perspective of Mr Lim Tanguy, Director, Pro Bono Services Office

In January 2006, the Law Society set up a committee to conduct a comprehensive review of the provision of legal aid in Singapore and make recommendations for improvement of the system to facilitate access to justice. Following the release of the committee’s study in December 2006, the Society decided to establish a Pro Bono Services Office (PBSO) and to appoint a Director of Pro Bono Services to enhance the development and coordination of the Society’s pro bono initiatives and support the Government’s initiatives for the provision of pro bono legal services. Until then, the Society’s Pro Bono initiatives had been siloed in 3 separate standing committees of Council overseeing the Society’s 3 main pro bono programmes, namely (1) The Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (2) Law Awareness and (3) Project Law Help.

On my part, I had been involved in pro bono work for a number of years and was a founding member of the Humanitarian Organization of Migration Economics (H.O.M.E.), a voluntary welfare organization, providing humanitarian assistance for migrants in Singapore. An important aspect of H.O.M.E’s humanitarian assistance is to provide pro bono aid to its shelter residents which I together with a few other lawyers delivered. My pro bono work with H.O.M.E. reinforced my belief in the critical need to facilitate access to justice for the disadvantaged.

When I learnt of the Society’s plans to establish the Office of Pro Bono Services and that the Society was recruiting a Director of Pro Bono Services to helm the Office, I saw a wonderful opportunity of meeting this critical need on a much greater scale than if I had carried on as a practitioner. What was also very attractive was being involved in setting up the Office from scratch which meant that there would be a lot of freedom in conceiving and shaping new pro bono initiatives and outreach programmes.

I came on board as the Director of Pro Bono Services with the establishment of PBSO on 1 August 2007.

One of the first key challenges to tackle was the strengthening of pro bono culture within the bar. Usually appeals for pro bono volunteers had been targeted at individual lawyers. PBSO’s first major new pro bono programme, the Community Legal Clinics (CLCs), however provided an opportunity to engage law firms instead of just individual volunteers. The CLCs would be running 4 nights a week, every week of the year and therefore required a very large pool of volunteers to sustain that level of frequency. PBSO therefore decided to invite the twenty largest law firms to take turns volunteering their lawyers for one clinic session per month. By engaging law firms instead of individual lawyers, the pro bono commitment would come from the firm’s leadership and signal the importance of pro bono engagement for the whole firm instead of at just an individual level. Instrumental in garnering the support of the largest firms was A/P Ho Peng Kee, who at the time was SMS, Ministry of Law. A/P Ho held lunches with Managing Partners of the largest law firms and encouraged them to volunteer their firms to support the CLCs. As a result, large law firm support was near uniform and the CLCs continue to this day as one of the most successful of the Society’s pro bono programmes with the support of Singapore’s largest law firms.

A second key challenge was to design and implement programmes which were relevant to actual needs on the ground. PBSO quickly forged close ties with key organisations in the social service sector including the National Council of Social Services the umbrella organisation for voluntary welfare organisations and Family Service Centres. The close ties with NCSS led to the creation of a referral protocol for social workers to have special priority in referring their impecunious clients for legal advice and assistance, legal clinics for community organisations and the better design and outreach of Law Awareness projects such as Law Cares for the elderly.

By leveraging on the expertise gained through the establishment and running of CLCs, PBSO has since set up specialist criminal and family legal clinics in collaboration with the Subordinate Courts. In addition this expertise is shared freely with other organisations seeking to provide legal assistance such as the Singapore Council of Women Organisations and its Maintenance Central initiative to assist persons seeking to apply for an enforce orders for maintenance.

A third key challenge was to engage the next generation of pro bono lawyers by reaching out to law undergraduates and exposing them to pro bono work. PBSO quickly established close ties with the NUS Pro Bono Group and SMU Pro Bono Club and provided a whole buffet of pro bono attachment
opportunities including support for our CLAS, CLCs and research support for volunteer lawyers. PBSO continues to meet regularly with the ExCos for both groups to share on new initiatives which may be of interest to the students and to see what support can be provided for the students' own initiatives.
Annex C: “It Is All Worthwhile”, a message from Mr Lok Vi Ming, SC, Vice-President of the Law Society, which appeared in the June 2011 issue of the Law Gazette.

On March 11, the Tohoku-Pacific Earthquake hit Japan with a magnitude of 8.8, the strongest earthquake ever to be recorded in Japan. The confirmed death toll from the twin blows of the earthquake and the tsunamis has exceeded 10,000 with thousands more still missing and more than 300,000 displaced from their homes. The failure of the nuclear reactors at Fukushima added to the pall of devastation. But the Japanese were not giving up.

Thousands of Japanese, yes, even the lawyers, rallied to help the victims. The Japan Federation of Bar Associations (“JFBA”) set up an Emergency Headquarters on the day of the disaster and rallied lawyers around the country to provide a full range of free legal counselling for the victims including free on site consultation at the rescue shelters; training for lawyers who wish to provide service to the victims; pushing for legislative reforms and measures to aid in relief and reconstruction efforts; helping to raise emergency funds for rescue and relief work. Lawyers also manned phone lines to give free legal consultation in over a dozen languages including Tagalog, Indonesian, Romanian, Burmese, Bengali, Russian, Polish and others. The fact that they were able to rally so many lawyers to offer such an extensive suite of services pro bono in such a short time testifies to the compassion the Japanese have for each other and their commitment to the shared task of nation building and national bonding. The Japanese have a word for this, it is “Tasuke ai” (助合) meaning “helping each other” or, “helping together”.

Just barely six weeks later on 21 April 2011, the ancient Japanese city of Kyoto was scheduled to host the 21st Annual Meeting and Conference of the Inter-Pacific Bar Association (“IPBA”). The IPBA leadership had a dilemma on their hands. Should the Kyoto Conference be pushed to another venue, or perhaps to another date? The IPBA decided to keep faith with Kyoto. The Japanese organisers then worked hard to make the Conference a success. In the end, over 900 lawyers representing 42 jurisdictions participated in the Conference, making this one of the best attended IPBA conferences ever and vindicating the decision to stand with our Japanese friends, and abide with Kyoto. The enthusiasm of the Japanese organisers also moved IPBA delegates to donate personal items that raised tens of thousands of dollars for the victims.

The decision of the IPBA to keep its event in Kyoto, one of the first international events to be held in Japan following the disasters, was acknowledged in numerous messages of gratitude and appreciation received from many Japanese citizens, local government agencies, economic, social and professional associations. It is rare indeed for lawyers to raise money when they meet, perhaps rarer still for local agencies and associations to be grateful for having almost 1,000 lawyers descend on their backyard. It does show that when lawyers do good, and show that they care, the impact is often great and will be appreciated.

The responsiveness of the Japanese lawyers got me thinking about our pro bono initiatives here and the extent of the ownership by our members of these initiatives. Perhaps it is unfair to compare the participation level here with the responses of a grief stricken nation? Perhaps, but I think it is fair to say that whilst it is true that more members are coming forward to serve on various pro bono projects, a good number are still unclear about what services are being offered and have never seriously considered personal participation in any of the initiatives.

The Law Society does offer an extensive suite of pro bono services, mainly through its Pro Bono Services Office (“PBS Office”), launched officially on 10 September 2007 to manage and administer all of the Law Society’s pro bono objectives. The idea that led to the establishment of the PBS Office was the challenge to each member to donate 25 hours per year towards pro bono work. With a membership of about 3,800 members, the pro bono challenge of 25 hours per member will translate into a potential bank of almost 100,000 pro bono hours which can be invested for the good of the community. This is a considerable arsenal that can be deployed for community outreach in a variety of ways:

Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (“CLAS”) which offers legal representation for accused persons regardless of nationality, who claim trial for certain criminal offences and who do not have the means to pay for a lawyer. Means testing applies.
2. **Community Legal Clinic ("CLC")** which offers free basic legal advice to Singaporeans/Permanent Residents who are facing a legal issue on personal matters and do not have access to legal advice or representation. The CLC operates four nights a week (Mon-Thu) every week of the year.

3. **Ad Hoc Pro Bono Referral Scheme ("APR")** which offers legal representation for persons who do not meet the criteria for existing legal aid schemes but nonetheless are in urgent need.

4. **Community Organisation Legal Clinic** which offers free basic legal advice by a volunteer lawyer on operational issues for charities, voluntary welfare organisations and non-profit organisations.

5. **Project Law Help Scheme** which assists charities, voluntary welfare organisations, non-profit organisations and social enterprises in Singapore by matching eligible organisations with a volunteer law practice to provide *pro bono* non-litigation commercial legal assistance.

6. **Law Awareness** is a public education initiative to raise public awareness of the law via public education seminars and exhibitions and through the publication of educational information.

Recently, one of the great supporters of the Law Society’s *pro bono* initiatives, Assoc Prof Ho Peng Kee, retired as Senior Minister of State for Ministry of Law and Ministry of Home Affairs. Prof Ho’s leadership as chairman of the Legal Aid Steering Committee from 2007 to 2010 had led to the setting up of the PBS Office to oversee and implement *pro bono* initiatives. A key initiative that was implemented by the PBS Office was the establishment of Community Legal Clinics to reach out to needy persons in Singapore. We always knew that Prof Ho could be counted on to support an event by his physical presence and are thankful that he was always ready to help. His helpfulness extended beyond the activities of the legal profession and I have seen him at numerous community events; encouraging primary school kids to study hard whilst giving out scholarships and bursaries; spending weekends with VWOs extending help to under privileged families; and autographing footballs to raise money for needy law students. He was also instrumental in the establishment of the Community Mediation Centre, an initiative that allowed parties a cheaper, possibly less acrimonious forum for dispute resolution. No task was too small for Prof Ho, and no request too large a sacrifice for him. His passion and his commitment to fairness, justice and access to justice are precious lessons for us. We will miss Prof Ho and his support and wish him well in the next chapters of his life.

Another veteran law maker with a point for us to reflect on is Dale Bumpers, former Governor of Arkansas. He served four years as Governor of Arkansas and another 24 years as Senator of the United States and during that time, he never lost an election. He retired from the Senate in 1998, but within two weeks of his retirement, he was contacted by President Bill Clinton (also an ex Governor of Arkansas) to make the Closing Speech for him in his impeachment trial. It was a speech that has been labelled “a classic in political oratory”.

Eighteen months after making the speech that saved the Clinton presidency, Dale Bumpers was admitted as a member of the Bar of the District of Columbia, at the age of 75. In his memoir, *The Best Lawyer in a One Lawyer Town*, he recounts an encounter with a guard at the Federal Courthouse, soon after he had set off the sensors to the metal detectors there.

“I looked up, and immediately in front of me was a black man about six feet four inches tall and perhaps sixty years old. He was staring at me with an inscrutable look. He had his scanner in hand, and I assumed he wanted me to “spread-eagle” in order to be scanned. Instead he said, “Senator Bumpers?”

“Yes.”

He paused a moment and then, “You know, I cried when you said you wasn’t going to run no more.”

“That may be the highest compliment I have ever received,” I said.

He paused a few seconds more and then said, “Would you give me a big hug?”

I said, “I would be honoured to give you a big hug.”

It was an indescribably gratifying moment that … made it all worthwhile.”
We may not be called upon to save presidents and indeed the work at our *pro bono* initiatives are far less in the glamour stakes. But there’s a certain magic that people who are involved in *pro bono* work can testify to. It is the gratitude of the community we help; folks who will lament the day you say you are not going to run anymore, but nonetheless so grateful for the sacrifices you have made, they express it not in money terms, but in the genuine and heartfelt way of the guard at the courthouse the day he met Dale Bumpers.

When that happens, you will realise that the practice of law and the sacrifices you have made, have been worthwhile.