Raising the bar on community service

ExxonMobil attorneys carry forward tradition of giving back.

Susan Barrington Sanchez and Rob Johnson
During her 46-year career with ExxonMobil, attorney Susan Barrington Sanchez has litigated everything from employment to antitrust issues, but one current legal case pulls at her heartstrings. Sanchez is helping a 13-year-old boy from Honduras – abandoned by his mother at the age of six and abused by his father before escaping his homeland – gain permanent residency status in the United States.

The boy is among hundreds of people from all walks of life who receive pro bono legal support from ExxonMobil attorneys each year in Houston, Dallas and Fairfax, Virginia.

“As lawyers, we have a duty to give a voice to those who don’t have one,” says Sanchez, coordinator and chair of ExxonMobil’s pro bono committee that oversees the volunteer efforts of company attorneys and staff. “It seems so simple to share something you already know, but it’s a big thing to the clients we help.”

A long commitment
ExxonMobil’s involvement in pro bono services began in 1917, when John D. Rockefeller Jr. funded an expansion of New York’s Legal Aid Society to include representation for criminal defendants.

In 2014, 175 Houston volunteers, including 135 attorneys and 35 support staff, devoted more than 3,000 hours to pro bono service, helping veterans, children, domestic violence survivors, immigrants and ordinary citizens with tax issues and will preparation.

They staffed three citizenship clinics, preparing more than

A sense of duty
Involved in pro bono work since graduating from the University of Texas School of Law in 2005, Audrey Hendricks, litigation counsel for ExxonMobil’s upstream commercial business, says one particular case solidified her commitment to always have a volunteer case in her legal portfolio.

“A young woman from Pakistan was sold by her brother to a wealthy man in their community to pay off debts. After several years of abuse, she came to America and was living in shelters in Houston,” Hendricks explains.

Upon taking the case through the Tahirih Justice Center, an organization serving immigrant women and girls fleeing gender-based violence, Hendricks helped the woman gain asylum last year.

“My motivation for pro bono work is based on a sense of duty,” Hendricks says. “These individuals come from the most horrendous situations and have demonstrated amazing courage in standing up to their abusers. Without an attorney, in all likelihood, their last flicker of hope would be snuffed out. Thirty hours of my time literally saved a woman’s life.”

Sharing expertise
Senior Tax Attorney Lindsey Aldrich regularly joins other ExxonMobil tax attorneys in counseling low-income taxpayers during Houston Volunteer Lawyers Tax Clinics. But when taxpayers need more than advice, lawyers like Aldrich are there to assist.

Aldrich is currently helping a Houston grandmother prove to the IRS that her 15-year-old grandson, whom she has raised as her son since he was three days old, qualifies as a dependent. “Part of it is just hearing her story. She really appreciates having someone believe in her and knows I’m going to be there,” Aldrich says.

With personal and corporate tax laws sharing similar concepts, Aldrich says volunteering enables her to apply her expertise on a different level.

“We’re helping people who are really grateful for our expertise. It’s great to use the knowledge you learned at school and through work to help people who really need it.”

Audrey Hendricks counsels a client.
to provide pro bono services. Her current immigration case is through Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), founded by Angelina Jolie and the Microsoft Corporation to provide quality and compassionate pro bono legal counsel to unaccompanied refugee and immigrant children in the United States. Currently, company lawyers represent 16 special immigrant juvenile status cases through KIND, which deemed ExxonMobil a unanimous choice for its 2015 Innovation Award for aiding children in deportation proceedings. For the ninth year in a row, the Houston Bar Foundation honored the company for setting the standard for pro bono service in Houston’s corporate legal community.

“While the recognition is certainly nice, we do this because it’s the right thing to do,” says Rob Johnson, assistant general counsel, who’s assisting Sanchez with the KIND case and who volunteers at veterans’ and other clinics. “At ExxonMobil, good corporate citizenship is important to us; it’s how the Law department gives back,” Johnson says. “Sometimes the work is relatively simple for us – listening to our clients’ stories and helping them obtain a protective order from an abusive spouse, for example. Sometimes it’s more complex, like helping someone attain special immigrant status so they can receive protective asylum. A modest contribution of time can potentially change someone’s life.”

Another dimension
“We tend to specialize at ExxonMobil, so pro bono work provides an opportunity to enhance our legal skills in another area while getting to know other lawyers in the community,” says Sanchez, noting that company attorneys often team up with local law firms and bar associations.
Mohammed A. Diwan believes that domestic violence is a major problem that needs to be addressed using existing and new resources. That’s why he spearheaded a legal clinic at the Houston Area Women’s Center (HAWC), in partnership with Houston Volunteer Lawyers (HVL) and law firm Norton Rose Fulbright.

Each month, a team of ExxonMobil lawyers and other volunteers visit HAWC’s women’s shelter to provide advice and counsel to residents. Since it started more than three-and-a-half years ago, the HAWC Shelter Legal Clinic has served more than 365 clients. In January, HVL set up a second legal clinic for HAWC’s nonshelter clients, modeled after the shelter clinic.

“The strength, courage and determination of our neighbors at the shelter inspire our team of volunteers,” says Diwan, counsel for ExxonMobil Chemical Company.

“I believe everyone can contribute to the development and growth of our community by helping to solve problems one person at a time.”