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*The Better Future. “Searching for leaders of sharing”*

**Esther Lardent, President & CEO of Pro Bono Institute (PBI)**

“I wanted to change the world… I started with changing the way lawyers were thinking”

35 years of work as public interest lawyer… expert knowledge and service

Established PBI in 1996 to facilitate pro bono activities (sharing expertise for public interest)

140 major law firms and corporate counsels involved

Provides self-evaluation program for member law firms

Presented in the conference to share thoughts



Esther Lardent, president and CEO of Pro Bono Institute, has actively facilitated law firm pro bono activities.

Esther F. Lardent, president and CEO of PBI, was born in a poor rural village in Poland. In 1939, her father was sent to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp and her mother to the Birkenau Camp by the Nazis who occupied Poland. Enduring through four years of severe torture and painful suffering, more than half of her family was lost. Her family, having no place to go or stay, headed to the Austria refugee camp. Lardent was born in the midst of refugees seeking for foods and medical aids. ‘Hoping to change the world in which social minorities are neglected’ she served as a public interest lawyer for 35 years and became a chair of ABA. However, she left the position, which would have guaranteed her success and instead established ‘Pro Bono Institute (PBI)’ in Washington with one of her colleagues in 1996. Since then, PBI has has continued its work in promoting and monitoring the pro bono work(sharing expertise or service for the purpose of public interest) of attorneys at major law firms. President Lardent organized a project - ‘Law Firm Pro Bono Challenge’ - in which law firms pledged to dedicate 3~5% of the total billable hours to pro bono service, and about 140 major law firms and 100 in-house legal departments have signed the challenge.

The Pro Bono Challenge changed the perception of pro bono that it is not just a work of individual attorney but a social responsibility and commitment for law firms. Through this change, the law firm pro bono work in the U.S. increased more than 300% over the last 15 years and in 2010 hit the record high of 4.45 million hours. On December 14th, we met Lardent, who presented in the ‘Current Status & Prospects of Law firm Pro Bono Work 2012’ symposium which took place in Lawyer’s Hall in Seocho-dong, Seoul, and learned about the history and know-how of PBI.

Q. What is the secret to the success of Law Firm Pro Bono Challenge?

A: We invited Supreme Court judges and major law firm partners to our annual seminars. There we presented statistics that indicated roughly 80% of socially disadvantaged people in the U.S. were not able to gain access to legal services. We explained that major law firms who have been neglecting them should be the ones to take the initiative in pro bono work. Supreme Court judges agreed with our vision and wrote letters to every law firm, encouraging them to participate in the Challenge and Attorney Generals sent thank-you letters to the Signatory Firms. As a result of the annual seminars, PBI’s Annual Conference developed into a regular closed meeting of partners from major global law firms and in-house counsels. We cooperated with ‘American Lawyer’, which annually announces law firm ranking, and included pro bono activities and hours in the evaluation criteria. Law firms that did not commit to pro bono work were ranked lower which led to have a direct negative impact on their revenues. Pro bono became the major topic of the legal community in the U.S. and the culture of giving became widespread to the extent of 60~100 hours of pro bono work per attorney annually.

Q. What is the reason for setting the Challenge’s standard to 3~5% of total billable hours?

A: We made decision by discussing with law firm partners in relation to everything from the definition of pro bono to minimum requirement hours. 3% of total billable hours will translate into 50 hours per attorney each year. Studies found that attorneys can fully commit to public interest work without negatively affecting the firm’s business when it is done once a week, four hours each month. Interestingly, New York State, by which more than 20% of total numbers of U.S. lawyers are qualified, recently changed its regulation into stating only persons who have done more than 50 hours of pro bono work are eligible to take the bar exam.

Q. What are the benefits for the firms who signed the Challenge and joined PBI as a member?

A. We provide free consulting service related to planning and running a pro bono program to every firm that becomes a member. In return for requiring member firms to submit their annual pro bono report to PBI, we give them in-depth analysis of their results. We also provide ‘self-evaluation programs’ for law firms for them to evaluate themselves on public interest work. The members get to participate in professional pro bono training opportunities and access PBI’s publications for free. Additionally, we hold annual conference where law firms can share their concerns, and organize meetings where they can network with various Non-Profit Organizations (NPO) working for various issues including women, environment, children, and human rights in the U.S. In the PBI’s Annual Dinner, we present awards to individuals, law firms and public interest organizations that demonstrated an exemplary commitment to pro bono work in the presence of fellow law firm partners and in-house partners.

Q. Who were the most noteworthy recipients of the award?

A. In 2006, 10,000 underage migrants were in danger of deportation because of the U.S. government’s unjust legal system. Microsoft’s legal department, 6 law firms and an NPO working for refugee rights started to cooperate to help them. Attorneys represented the 10,000 underage migrants free of charge, and NPO provided education on the rights of migrants and the state of refugees to attorneys who didn’t major in immigration law. After several hearings, the migrants were allowed to stay in the U.S. and the unjust articles of the immigration law were revised. Accordingly, Pro Bono Partner Award of 2006 was given to them.

Q. What is the organizational structure of PBI? How does PBI operate as an NGO that doesn’t receive financial support from the government?

A. There is a total of 13 staff members; 6 attorneys, 2 media staffs, 1 fund raiser and 4 administrative staff members. Membership fees are paid differently depending on the firm’s size and account for 10% of operational cost. Also, 15% comes from ABA’s funding, 10% from conference registration fees and 10% from individual donations. Sometime we secure additional 10% support for in-depth consulting. The rest of 45% comes from donations from individual law firms and corporations. Each law firm and corporation voluntarily donates to PBI for high quality consulting services and promotion of pro bono activities.

Q. In the U.S. the number of public interest lawyer amounts to almost 10,000 out of 1.2 million lawyers. In Korea, however, there are only 20 public interest lawyers out of 14,000. Do you have any advice as to how we could promote both Korean law firms and lawyers to engage in pro bono work?

A. Most of the law firms believe that pro bono work would interfere with their business, but that is not the case. Because pro bono work is an opportunity to represent various cases, attorneys can empower themselves in the long term. The 2005 global pro bono survey organized by PBI that was done in partnership with Latham & Watkins LLP projected that 71 countries found pro bono work to bring positive impacts on law firms and attorneys. Wise firms do not seek immediate gains but instead invest in people.