
WilmerHale Attorneys Find Roots in Community During Pickering Fellowship

Steve Smith

In January, Steve Smith rotated out of the firm to join the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs (WLC), an organization that has handled more than 5,000 civil rights cases since its establishment 40 years ago. The nonprofit WLC focuses on employment, housing, public accommodations, prisoners' rights, rights of persons with disabilities, and immigration matters, and represents plaintiffs with claims of discrimination based on race, gender, national origin, disability, age, religion and sexual orientation.

"I had a choice of organizations, but for me, this was an ideal match," says Smith, who was still an associate at the time he applied for the fellowship. "I was interested in using my legal skills to help the DC community and to continue the pro bono traditions of the firm. Though I'm originally from the Philadelphia area, I have become rooted in the legal community in Washington DC. I've represented a lot of clients, but not many individual plaintiffs, who are my main clients during my time at WLC."

Three months into his fellowship at the WLC, Smith works on cases of race discrimination and retaliation in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. "I'm also working on protecting the ability of persons in DC to serve as contractors to the city government, despite the fact that they may have a record of minor criminal offenses dating back a number of years," he explains.

With a "lean" staff of just 23 at the WLC, Smith has already been called upon to make a number of quick strategic decisions. "There aren't as many layers of review on my work here, which is empowering" he says. "Some of the cases we're bringing haven't been tried before. I've been encouraged to try some creative approaches, whether with courts or administrative agencies."

Though he's been plunged right into a full workload at the WLC, Smith says the organization, which has a history of hosting WilmerHale fellows, welcomed him warmly before putting him to work. "It's been an education as I've gone along; I'm definitely learning on the job," he says. "It's a steep learning curve, and I'm trying to make my way up that curve so I can be a valuable member of the team here and give them the help they need."

Indeed, Smith made a big transition from his work at the firm, where he concentrates on government contracts and investigations involving securities and antitrust matters. “Though the areas of law are different, the skills I’ve developed at the firm over a number of years have served me well at the WLC,” he says. “I’m now getting a perspective on an area of law that is so different from what I’ve done before. It’s good just to see that there’s this whole other branch of lawyering I can stay involved in on some level.”

Associates who have been with the firm for at least two years are eligible to apply for the Pickering Fellowship. Attorneys interested in the program must complete an application, which includes questions about why they are interested in the program and what they hope to achieve. An interoffice group—which includes members from New York, DC, Boston and Palo Alto—reviews the applications. Candidates must also be cleared by legal personnel and practice managers to ensure that their workload will permit them to rotate out of the firm for six months.

“It’s a great honor to have been selected by the firm to do this,” says Smith. “It’s evidence of the firm’s real commitment to pro bono work and staying heavily involved with the DC community. I’m really appreciative of the chance to do this, to represent WilmerHale and to serve the community in this way.”

Shawna Friedman

For Shawna Friedman, the chance to help the most vulnerable residents of New York City was one she could not pass up, having been involved in pro bono work at WilmerHale. In March, she rotated out of the firm to join the Urban Justice Center (UJC), a nonprofit umbrella organization for a number of projects tackling such issues as community development, domestic violence, homelessness, human rights and mental health through legal advocacy, policy and direct services.

“I like that the UJC focuses on a range of issues for low-income New Yorkers,” says Friedman, who is involved with the organization’s Community Development Project, which provides legal, technical, research and policy assistance to grassroots community groups engaged in a range of community development efforts. “Given the state of the economy, organizations that are helping the most vulnerable city residents are good places for lawyers to spend their time and resources.”

Though she only recently joined the UJC, Friedman became familiar with the organization when she was a summer associate in 2005. “As one of its summer events, WilmerHale’s New York office attends a fundraiser hosted by the UJC,” she explains. “Former WilmerHale Partner Chris Meade was a UJC board member at the time, and sent an email around about the organization and the event. I got onto the UJC’s email list, and for several years continued to get updates. It’s a fantastic organization.”

Friedman is no stranger to pro bono and community service, having been active in such work at WilmerHale. This year, she was a recipient of the New York State Association of Criminal Defense

Lawyers' 2010 Gideon Champion of Justice Award for her pro bono representation of Dewey Bozella, which resulted in his release from prison after serving 26 years for a murder for which he was wrongfully convicted.

Though her desire to help members of the community carried over to the UJC, Friedman admits the legal matters she's focusing on now are new territory. "At the firm, my practice is focused on commercial and securities litigation," she explains. "Here, my areas of focus are housing law and foreclosure prevention, which were brand new to me. I don't own a home, so even the concept of learning about mortgages was new. As lawyers, especially litigators, we're used to having to pick up new areas of law, and part of the goal here is to get exposure to different areas."

Despite the learning curve, Friedman says it's rewarding to work directly with her UJC clients every day. "But for the UJC's help, many of these clients would be without legal representation," she says. "You feel you're making a difference in the life of someone who is about to lose a home in foreclosure, or a tenant who lives in really unbearable conditions and doesn't know what to do. It's rewarding as a lawyer to make an immediate impact. Sometimes a matter at the firm takes months or years to resolve. This is smaller-scale, direct advocacy."

Friedman feels equally passionate about the Pickering Fellowship program itself, joining a number of WilmerHale attorneys who have participated in the program since it was instituted in 2006. "It's an honor to participate, and it speaks to the firm's commitment to pro bono work," she says. "It's one of the reasons I wanted to be an associate at WilmerHale. I've had the opportunity to focus on amazing pro bono work at the firm, and I'm very lucky to have this opportunity. In addition to helping clients, it's beneficial as a lawyer to have more direct client experience. This will help in my role as a litigator when I return to the firm."

Along with Smith, Friedman joins former fellows Real Estate Senior Associate Terrence McNeil, Securities Litigation & Enforcement and Investigations & Criminal Litigation Counsel Katherine Zucca, Business Trial Group and Government & Regulatory Litigation Senior Associate Bronwen Blass, Intellectual Property Senior Associate David Giordano, former WilmerHale Counsel Katherine Gillespie, former WilmerHale Associate Roberto Gonzalez, Business Trial Group and Government & Regulatory Litigation Counsel Danielle Conley, Investment Management Senior Associate Lisa Parrington, and Fund Formation and Corporate Senior Associate Lara Phimister. Fellowships have been conducted at the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and the Legal Counsel for the Elderly, both in DC; the Medical-Legal Partnership for Children and the Political Asylum/Immigration Representation Project, both in Boston; and the National Center for Law and Economic Justice and the UJC, both in New York.