Starting early on pro bono legal work

Some law students and young lawyers see volunteering as a way to grow and learn

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“Doing pro bono is the reason why I am a lawyer,” said Ms June Lim. Students and young lawyers like Ms Lim, 25, whose focus is juvenile and family law, actively help those in need of legal aid for free. They have been doing so even before the Chief Justice’s call for more lawyers to do pro bono work.

Some clock in hours at community legal clinics, while others assist voluntary welfare organisations. At least two have gone the full distance, representing in court needy people who cannot afford a lawyer.

Typically, however, it is the more seasoned lawyers who, having built up their practice and wanting to give back to society, do such volunteer work.

Earlier this month, Chief Justice Chan Sek Keung and other top legal figures called for more lawyers to take up cases for free.

They are mulling over measures like making pro bono work mandatory before one can be a Senior Counsel, and drawing up a table to compare how big firms fare in this area.

Agreeing with the idea of such compulsory volunteer work is criminal lawyer Josephus Tan, 32.

“Young lawyers should know that when you do pro bono, you also learn,” said the associate at Patrick Tan LLC.

Mr Tan, previously a computer salesman before becoming a lawyer in 2009, regularly gives free legal advice at community centres.

He has also defended accused persons in court for free – for instance, barber Ng Tian Soo, who was jailed seven years two months ago for culpable homicide, 28 years after the deed.

In three years, Mr Tan has taken up 57 such cases, mostly through the Pro Bono Services Office under the Law Society of Singapore.

Thanks to such volunteer work, Mr Tan is today the youngest full-fledged criminal lawyer here.

Pro bono work helps young lawyers see the world in perspective, said commercial lawyer Joyce Ng, 28. “It teaches you about the real world, to empathise with people. Or else, you’d just be stuck in your ivory tower,” said the senior associate at Wong/Partnership LLP.

Her work often involves monetary disputes between construction firms, but at community legal clinics, where she volunteers once every three months, she deals with issues closer to her heart, such as divorces and child custody fights.

An elderly couple in their 60s once came to her about their son, who owed loan sharks money. They “wanted the harassing to stop by disowning their own son”, she recalled. “I thought, how could such things even happen?”

Mr Lim Tanguy, director of the Pro Bono Services Office, said getting people to do volunteer work early in their careers is critical in developing a pro bono spirit.

“Otherwise, other priorities would have started to jostle for space and attention in their drive to develop their careers,” he said.

That is why his office works closely with the pro bono groups at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Singapore Management University (SMU) law schools.

One initiative: a two-week stint with the Pro Bono Services Office for students to get involved in two pro bono schemes, the criminal legal aid scheme and the community legal clinics.

Students on attachments might interview prisoner applicants or work at the Institute of Mental Health, and assist at legal advice sessions.

Mr Chan Yi Cheng, 22, a second-year NUS law student, described pro bono work as an “eye-opening experience. Many of us go to top schools and come from well-to-do families,” said Mr Chan, who has helped at community legal clinics. “This teaches us to feel for the less fortunate.”

SMU will set up its own legal clinic on the grounds of its campus, said Ms Abigail Kor, 20, president of the SMU Pro Bono Club.

Another upcoming programme is Project Schools, said Ms Kor, a second-year law student.

This initiative involves launching a set of eight to 10 introductory lessons in the curriculum of secondary schools. By this July, about 10 secondary schools will have learnt about the law and how it affects them during their Civics and Moral Education classes.