

Speech by Secretary for Justice (English only)

Following is the speech delivered by the Secretary for Justice, Ms Elsie Leung, at the Asian Legal Business Awards 2002 Ceremony today (November 7):

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am greatly honoured to be invited to attend tonight's event and to present the Pro Bono Law Firm of the Year Award.

"Pro bono" or its full name "pro bono publico" is one of the few Latin phrases that survive in our everyday legal talk. It is so because the notion of providing service to those who cannot afford to pay for them strikes at the very heart of our calling. It is "for the good of the public" that most, if not all, of us are called to the legal profession.

Pro bono service may take many forms. For those of us in the public sector it may often involve participating in committees or projects that serve to enhance the legal system. For those of you in the private sector, it may be all of that and possibly more. You may directly represent clients who cannot afford legal assistance through for example the Duty Lawyer Service, numerous non-government organisations, or even through private service to needy individuals. Beyond these activities, many of us also serve in a diverse number of community organisations and charitable groups as their trustees, counsel or directors.

Some people may ask why? Why should lawyers bother to perform free legal services at a time when we are all faced with increased economic pressure? To answer the question, I would like to relate to you a story which many of you are probably familiar with.

An old man was walking on the beach one day and he came upon a young boy. The beach was covered with starfish, and the boy was throwing them one at a time, into the water. The man asked the boy what he was doing. "The starfish will die if they stay out of the water," the boy said. The man told him his work was futile. "There are so many starfish, you can't possibly help them all," he argued. But the boy picked up another starfish and hurled it back into the ocean. "Well, I've made a

difference for that one," said the boy.

It is with the heart of that boy that many of us in the legal profession take up pro bono work. For we believe what we do does make a difference for the individual or individuals whom we served. Tonight, we would like to pay tribute to those who have made a difference, one person at a time.

The Pro Bono Law Firm of the Year Award is to be given to the law firm which has contributed most to the community by way of voluntary legal services to the poor or disadvantaged.

I understand that all of the nominees for the award have been actively participating in pro bono work and are well qualified for the award. There may only be one winner tonight. But I am sure you will all agree that the true winners are those who have been helped, as well as the community as a whole because justice should be available to everyone, not just to a privileged few. Those who are performing pro bono work may make a difference for people one at a time. But collectively we could make a huge difference for society as a whole.

End/Thursday, November 7, 2002

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