

DANILOFF REFLECTS ON GIVING BACK

Laura Ernde

Deborah Daniloff's face lights up when she talks about one of the pro bono family law cases she worked on last year, helping to reunite a young man with his child. If not for the legal help, the man might have been too intimidated to seek a visitation order from the court.

"That felt really good to help him get there," said Daniloff, who works at Bank of America as assistant general counsel and director – global transaction services.

Daniloff, fresh off a three-year term on the Bar Association of San Francisco's Justice and Diversity Center (JDC) Board, took some time recently to reflect on her volunteer experiences with both the bar association and her pro bono clients.



Deborah Daniloff, right, with Christine Mastromonaco, holding a divorce order they obtained for their pro bono client.

One of her goals in joining the JDC board was to serve as a bridge between her colleagues in the bank's San Francisco office and JDC's pro bono resources. Thanks to the training that JDC provided, she teamed up with a law firm, McGuireWoods, to take on three full-scope family law cases. The law firm assisted with court filings and other steps in the process that an in-house team isn't equipped to handle. The lawyers from Bank of America and McGuireWoods were also able to check each other's work and make sure court appearances were covered.

In addition to the visitation case, Daniloff handled a guardianship case and a divorce. A woman who had obtained asylum in the U.S. needed to untangle herself legally from

an abusive spouse she had left behind. All the cases ended with the outcomes her clients wanted.

Not only was it personally rewarding to help people who could not afford to hire a lawyer, but Daniloff said she also enjoyed the camaraderie she developed with the attorneys and paralegals she teamed up with. In a small-world moment, Daniloff and her co-counsel, McGuireWoods associate Christine M. Mastromonaco had worked together all the way through one case only to finally realize their connection. Daniloff had worked with Mastromonaco's father Pete Mastromonaco when they were both "baby lawyers" at Steefel, Levitt & Weiss.



Deborah Daniloff helped Gilbert O'Guinn reunite with his daughter, Jordan O'Guinn.

Daniloff said she is fortunate that Bank of America encourages its legal staff to do pro bono work by having policies in place and recognizing volunteer work in its performance criteria. Even with that support, it's always a challenge to balance competing responsibilities.

Her advice to other lawyers is to start small and “don't try to talk yourself out of it.”

“Most lawyers will say they don't have time, but you have to kind of look up from the desk sometimes and say, ‘It's just going to be something I do,’” she said. “You'll hopefully feel rewarded.”

The bar recently recognized Daniloff's commitment and enthusiasm to her volunteer work. Individually, she received the In-House Counsel Diversity Award. Her company, Bank of America, was honored with the Outstanding Corporation Award for commitment to pro bono.

Although Daniloff is leaving the JDC board, her bar association involvement continues. She is serving on the

Women's Impact Committee: No Glass Ceiling 2.0, a resurrection of the bar's No Glass Ceiling initiative from 2002-2003. “It's become more apparent on a national level that there's still a lot of work to do,” she said. “It's definitely a time when women are energized.”

Daniloff was also recently named to the bar's Judiciary Committee, which helps vet potential superior court judges. And, now that she has been trained in the intricacies of family law, who knows what kinds of pro bono cases await.

Laura Ernste is a San Francisco-based communications consultant. She has covered legal affairs for more than a decade, as a journalist and former editor of the California Bar Journal.