

Lobbyists feel good by doing good

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Last year, lobbyist Paul Miller arrived at a technology conference expecting unexciting training on some new software. He left with an Animal Planet-like education and a new cause: saving abused tigers, lions and other big cats.

At the conference, Carole Baskin presented the grass-roots technology she uses to manage Big Cat Rescue, her sanctuary for big cats in Tampa, Fla. The technology didn't captivate Miller as much as the cats did. Baskin shocked Miller with tales of tigers kept in cages, lions used as shooting practice and leopards butchered for their fur.

So the founder of the small lobbying shop Miller/Wenhold Capitol Strategies offered his services to her on the spot. Because Baskin could barely afford any staff, let alone a Washington lobbyist, Miller took on the case for free. He flew down to the sanctuary and spent two days with the 150 cats. Then he stormed the Hill, advocating for a law to protect them.

In April, Rep. Nancy Boyda (D-Kan.) introduced Haley's Act, named for a 17-year-old girl who was mauled to death by a tiger at an animal sanctuary in Kansas. If passed, the law would crack down on illegal animal dealers and create humane care standards for the cats.

"Baskin has her hands full," said Miller, a former president of the American League of Lobbyists. "The least I can do is volunteer some hours."

He is one of a small but growing number of lobbyists who volunteer their services for a really special set of special interests. They're helping nonprofits push legislative agendas, asylum-seekers get citizenship and monuments get designated as federal landmarks.

Lobbyists across town are working to get funding for family substance abuse treatment, to screen educational films at refugee camps and to provide after-school activities for the children of active-duty soldiers. And they're doing it all for free.

"Clients pay a lot of money to have (lobbyists) work for them, because they are effective," said Esther Lardent, president of the Pro Bono Institute at Georgetown University Law Center. "Now we're starting to make those tools available for people who have no access to the system."

Pro bono lobbying is almost exclusively a D.C. phenomenon, due to the confluence of large law firms and the sheer number of lobbyists in town. The traditional pro bono case usually involves large-scale, media-grabbing litigation. Supreme Court cases and defending people on death row fit the bill nicely. But over time, as more lawyers started to see volunteerism as a professional duty, the definition expanded into other practice areas.

In Washington, that means donating influence. The city's revolving door continuously sends committed public servants into the private sector. Although their paychecks increase, their sense of civic duty stays constant.

"(Pro bono) is an opportunity for continued public service," said Hogan & Hartson partner Robert Kyle.

He knows the feeling firsthand; the former special assistant to President Bill Clinton on international trade and finance now helps the Africa Society of the National Summit on Africa with legislative strategy. Last year, Kyle helped the group lobby to extend the African Growth and Opportunity Act.

"This opportunity seemed like another way to help with something I thought was a good thing to pursue (under Clinton)," he explained.

The free work is particularly helpful to small, understaffed nonprofits. Larger organizations such as Human Rights First or the ACLU usually have their own legislative experts on staff. But smaller groups generally don't have the connections or Hill savvy to get their agenda through Congress, so free lobbying can be a major boost.

That's the case at nonprofit Journey Through Hallowed Ground, which picked up pro bono lobbying help from lawyers at Akin Gump. The volunteer lobbyists are helping the group get a 175-mile strip from Gettysburg, Pa., to Monticello, Va., designated as a national heritage area. Both the Senate and the House introduced bipartisan legislation this session supporting designation. In March, the governors of Virginia, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Maryland sent a letter of support.

Niche nonprofits aren't the only beneficiaries of free advocacy. Since 2002, DLA Piper has represented the government of Afghanistan in Washington completely pro bono. The firm helped the Afghans set up an embassy, procure billions from Congress and nab high-level meetings in both the White House and on Capitol Hill. Last year, DLA spent 670 hours on the project.

The management of pro bono lobbying varies across firms. Most law firms have a standardized process, in part because volunteering is considered an almost mandatory part of the profession. In 1993, the American Bar Association revised its rule of professional conduct to describe donating 50 hours of free legal work a year as a

"professional responsibility."

Georgetown's Pro Bono Institute challenges firms to donate either 100 hours per attorney or an amount of time equal to 5 percent of the firm's total billable hours. More than 150 large firms have signed off on the standard. Most large firms have pro bono coordinators or partners working full time to vet and staff pro bono projects.

According to The American Lawyer, last year the 200 biggest law firms logged 36 percent more pro bono hours than they did five years ago. Lobbying made up only a small percentage of these hours. Steven Schulman, pro bono partner for Akin Gump, said that lobbying work made up 10 percent of the Washington office's 11,342 pro bono hours.

Straight lobbying shops put the impetus on the individual to find and maintain projects. Miller says that's because the lobbying shops are new businesses. "The lobbying profession is moving in a more codified direction but have some things we have to catch up on," he explained.

Of course, it's not purely altruistic. Volunteering can have business benefits. For lobbyists, it provides the opportunity to contact legislators and staffers on overwhelmingly positive proposals. Everyone looks good helping a shelter get more funding or creating a new park.

There's also the reputation issue. As president of American League of Lobbyists during the Jack Abramoff scandal, Miller fought an endless PR battle on behalf of his profession. He testified before Congress, pleaded his case to the public on TV and introduced the first lobbying certification program. But one easy way all lobbyists can help revamp their image, he says, is simply by doing good. "It's good for business when you do those things," Miller said.