

PRO BONO PROFILE: NEW PERIMETER

Rachel Hall

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Starting early is often the best way to ensure habits become ingrained, which is the attitude that DLA Piper LLP's pro bono arm New Perimeter and US based NGO Appleseed are taking towards developing a sustainable pro bono culture in Mexico – and if law firm testimonials are anything to go by, they've already been seeing results.

"We're trying to reach the next generation of lawyers at the beginning, so that they graduate with the tools to give back to their communities and further a culture of pro bono," says New Perimeter director and DLA Piper pro bono partner Lisa Dewey of the organisation's programme of seminars in Mexican law schools. Working in conjunction with Appleseed's Mexican office, the firm has been leading seminars in major Mexican law schools, such as those based at the Universidad Panamericana, Tecnológico de Monterrey and Instituto Tecnológico de Mexico.

The programme began in 2008 and since has deployed a range of teaching models to try and introduce budding Mexican lawyers to pro bono concepts, including one-off seminars and graded university modules. "We've been doing it long enough now that we're really seeing the impact of the work and the changes occurring in Mexico City in terms of more and more lawyers showing interest in doing pro bono work. We've got lawyers coming back to Appleseed and telling us about how they've been trying to start up pro bono programmes at their new firms," says Dewey.

The seminars tackle a range of different topics. Some are more practical, introducing students to the different methods of finding and carrying through a project, while others take a more theoretical stance, for instance looking at juvenile justice and immigration issues. There are visiting guest lawyers giving talks on class action and litigation and, as part of the graded university module, students were given the opportunity to try pro bono work out for size. "There's more and more of a buzz on campus about what Mexico Appleseed is doing and about pro bono, how we can improve the curriculum here, how we can incorporate more pro bono – we're starting to see real results," says Dewey.

In addition to targeting young lawyers, DLA Piper and Appleseed also provide technical assistance to law firms developing pro bono programmes, including via their own pro bono clearinghouse. "It's a two pronged approach," says Dewey. The two firms host events aimed at bringing Mexico's legal community together to discuss the need for pro bono work in Mexico and the impact it has on society. Appleseed brings the contacts to the table, while DLA Piper contributes examples of previous projects undertaken by its New Perimeter arm in the hope of inspiring Mexican lawyers to do something similar. "The main goal is to promote pro bono culture, to encourage independent lawyers, universities, bar associations and to professionalise pro bono culture in our country," says Mexico Appleseed's executive director, Maru Cortázar.

A source of considerable pride for DLA Piper and Appleseed is an on-going bi-national project, in collaboration with Mexico's Jáuregui y Navarrete and US firms Mayer Brown LLP and Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP, examining the issue of unaccompanied minors crossing the border between Mexico and the US, and how they are treated upon arrival in the US as well as when they are repatriated. The project was recently lauded by UNICEF, and the firms have been requested to give recommendations to the US and Mexican governments on how to improve the protection of unaccompanied minors between nations. "I think this is a very good way to show how the pro bono

model can work bi-nationally...we are so proud about this award, but mostly because it's a pro bono model – it's not very common to find this in Mexico," says Cortázar.

Although for the time being this style of project is only in Mexico, Dewey asserts that New Perimeter is thinking seriously about replicating it in other countries. "I think that will happen in Latin America for sure," she says. "We're talking about replicating it in Brazil, and Chile is another place where we're thinking about taking this as a model."

Things have changed a little since New Perimeter began the project four years ago. Back then, DLA Piper did not have a presence in Mexico, but in February this year it opened an office in Mexico City. "We're excited now that we do have a presence in Mexico and we can leverage that to fit in very nicely with the pro bono work we're doing here," says Dewey.

Dewey says that New Perimeter has tended to operate in countries where the firm doesn't have an office since its inception in 2005. She says that the organisation originated from the firm's interest in pursuing larger, longer term pro bono projects, particularly in developing and post-conflict countries. The projects are staffed by DLA Piper lawyers, who must pass a competitive selection process to work on the projects, and collaborations on the ground with local partners. It's proven popular too - in 2011 some 220 DLA Piper lawyers were involved in pro bono projects across the globe, contributing over 15,000 hours of their time.

For more information see the New Perimeter website.