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ATTORNEY GIVES TIME TO ASYLUM SEEKERS

Anne Downey gets colleagues involved in her pro bono mission

Over a 30-plus-year career as an attorney, Anne Downey has dedicated her practice to intellectual property and trademark matters as well as nonprofit corporation law.

All that work was meaningful, but maybe not quite as fulfilling as the work she's done in the last year. She has been helping individuals from war-torn countries including Afghanistan and Ukraine prepare asylum cases and start new lives safely in the U.S. and Canada.

"Some of the things these people have been through are unbelievable," she said. "The stories are heart-wrenching."

Downey, a partner with Harter Secrest & Emery LLP since 2018, was recognized by the New York State Bar Association through its Empire State Counsel Outstanding Pro Bono Volunteers awards program for dedicating more than 50 hours of pro bono legal services.

She was introduced to the plight of local asylees last spring through the International Institute of Buffalo. The group was working with area nonprofits to solicit professional help for dozens of individuals to meet a hard one-year deadline to file asylum applications with the U.S. government.

"A lot of them arrived in August 2021, so the one-year would run out August 2022," she said. "We were all flabbergasted by families who are trying to do this on their own by themselves, in a foreign country with a foreign language. It moves you to tears."

After Downey heard the plea for help, she reached out to colleagues at other area law firms. At Harter Secrest, she created nine teams of four to five attorneys each to get the work done.

The cases weren't easy, and required at least 50 hours.

"We put together these teams of attorneys ranging from brand new associates up to the most senior partners," Downey said. "It's a very cool opportunity for people who wouldn't necessarily work together on a day-to-day basis."

Downey came to Western New York in 1985



after law school at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, where she met her husband, a Buffalo native. The daughter of a retail clothing store manager who moved his family to several states for new opportunities, Downey studied literature, then worked in banking before heading to law school.

She is no stranger to nonprofits: Downey started her career in trademark law, which led to nonprofit incorporation law and for several years has been pro bono counsel for Back to Basics Outreach Ministries.

"I could go serve at a soup kitchen but I have a special skillset and I can do some specialized stuff that not everyone can do," she said. "It feels like if I have this privilege of having a law license, I should try to work and make the world a better place."

—Tracey Drury

ANNE DOWNEY

Day job:

Harter Secrest & Emery LLP

Community:

Pro bono work, Back to Basics Outreach Ministries

Self-description: Caring

What keeps you up at night: Nothing. I try to manage stress and not be awake at night.

Who is your hero? Pastor James Giles at Back to Basics. He's there in the trenches every day, helping all kinds of people in crisis – the poor, the hungry, the abused, addicts, prisoners who need to re-enter society and people traumatized by May 14, and he does it with a smile.