



Yasmin Anwar

Will Allen

Felicity Kirk

Yasmin Anwar: Hi, my name's Yasmin Anwar.

Will Allen: Hello, my name's Will Allen.

Yasmin Anwar: Welcome to *Trainee Insights* pro bono highlights.

Will Allen: In this episode, we connect with Felicity Kirk, who leads international pro bono at Ropes & Gray's London office. We'll be asking Felicity about her transition from corporate law's pro bono and for some insights into the firm's pro bono work.

Yasmin Anwar: Felicity, it's great to have you here with us today.

Felicity Kirk: Great to be here and thank you very much for including pro bono in this podcast series. There's an increasing amount of interest in law firm pro bono, both from those at firms and those looking to join firms, so I'm really delighted to have the chance to talk to you today a little bit about it.

Yasmin Anwar: Fantastic—that's great to hear.

Will Allen: So, without further ado, I say let's get into the questions. Felicity, you've had an interesting and varied career. Would you mind telling us a little bit about your journey from transactional legal work into the pro bono space?

Felicity Kirk: I'm definitely poacher turned gamekeeper. I started as an asset finance lawyer for a big international firm and spent five years in Tokyo and Paris. And then, have spent 25 years setting up and managing international

pro bono practices for law firms. I was one of the first lawyers appointed to this pro bono role back in 1997, and I'm so thrilled that there are now some 60 of us across city and UK law firms. As to the type of work we do, it's a huge variety, and that is just the interesting thing about my role. I have a lot of autonomy to source work, anything that I think I can persuade the lawyers at Ropes & Gray to take on and come within our pro bono criteria, from a domestic violence clinic in collaboration with other law firms to work on the very topical issue of Ukraine.

Will Allen: Thanks for that, Felicity. That's a really good introduction and really interesting.

Yasmin Anwar: Yes, and you mentioned that you've got a huge variety of work across law firms in London. But in terms of Ropes & Gray-specific pro bono work in London, can you give us a little bit more insight on that, both historical and current?

Felicity Kirk: When I joined, one of the first pieces of work that I was able to bring in was for the Nature Conservancy and a particularly innovative piece of financing work, a debt for nature swap for the Seychelles. We were able to put together quite a significant team of lawyers to do this transactional piece of work, which involved the Nature Conservancy lending money to the government of the Seychelles at pretty advantageous rates of interest which enabled them to buy back some very expensive sovereign debt. And the money they saved—they made a lot of environmental commitments to set up a marine conservation zone—so there was some very standard financing documentation that we did pro bono, but then also some particularly innovative marine conservation and conservation documents. And more recently, we have been helping Afghan nationals as they seek to settle in the UK on some of the government schemes; helping claimants who have been victims of the Windrush scandal paying compensation from the Home Office; and helping start-up companies/businesses operating in the green cleantech space with basic legal needs. Some of our lawyers have been mentoring the founders of those businesses to help them understand the importance of getting the right advice at the right time.

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Yasmin Anwar: That’s really interesting, Felicity. It seems like there’s a wide range that people can be involved with. I guess, from my perspective as a trainee, it feels a great way to be involved at a junior level and be close to clients and running with work streams you might not get with other clients.

Felicity Kirk: That’s absolutely the case. Extremely important to say very clearly that it’s not the trainees that bear the pro bono load at the firm. It’s very evenly spread, and it’s extremely important both for the experience of the trainee and for the work experience of the client that trainees take on this work and are supervised involving a team in exactly the same way you would be with a billable piece of work. But as you have pointed out, due to the scale of a lot of the billable work that we’re doing at Ropes & Gray, the role that a trainee can play is somewhat limited and more specific. You can indeed take on a much greater degree of responsibility in some of our pro bono matters, be it advising a smaller charity on a restructuring, getting involved with some of our domestic violence clients, running one of our citizenship application cases for minors (children who have the right to be here but don’t have any documentation). And it can be a very valuable part of a young lawyer’s development, not just in terms of the legal work that you’re doing but actually managing a program and client relationships.

Yasmin Anwar: Yes, definitely. And I think it’s such a great way to be in touch with other associates and partners that you work with that maybe aren’t in your team when you’re in a certain seat.

Felicity Kirk: Absolutely—both in the London office and within our international network of offices we do a lot of cross-staffing, and it’s a fantastic opportunity to meet colleagues and work with colleagues that you wouldn’t otherwise perhaps get the chance.

Will Allen: I’ve definitely found that in doing the pro bono work that I’ve taken on at my time at Ropes. It’s a great way to meet people from other teams, I agree. So, Felicity, moving on, what do you feel has been the greatest achievement so far in terms of ongoing pro bono work at Ropes’ London office? If you could name just one, I’m sure our listeners would appreciate that.

Felicity Kirk: Ongoing, I would say, it is our [Kids in Need of Defense](#) program. We’re founding members of this collaboration helping undocumented minors gain citizenship or leave to remain. And it was quite a departure for the London office—we, for the very first time, were directly representing individuals in quite a complex application process with the Home Office. We have linked up with Kids in Need of Defense UK, who provide very specialist training and supervision for us, which is key when we’re stepping out into an area that isn’t within our usual practice.

Yasmin Anwar: We’ve touched on it a bit on how rewarding it is to be involved in pro bono matters, but, I guess more generally, why do you think it is so important that law firms undertake work in the pro bono spaces? How do you think Ropes & Gray’s London office stands out in the space?

Felicity Kirk: Extremely important that law firms undertake pro bono work. Also extremely important is that we’re not trying to fill a gap in the unmet legal need left by reductions in legal aid—we’re not seen as a solution by the government—that we do the right kind of work that fits with our skills, pushes us into areas that we, perhaps, as I mentioned before, don’t usually work in. But always with the right training, supervision, partnerships and collaborations with appropriate NGOs, I think there’s a huge commitment at the firm. We’re not alone in that, but for me—and I’ve worked with two other very international law firms—Ropes & Gray stands out in that respect. The fact that all the hours that our lawyers spend on pro bono work are counted as billable, treated in exactly the same way as billable hours are treated for the purposes of compensation and bonuses. It’s not why lawyers do it, but I think that’s a very significant acknowledgment of the importance of pro bono work at Ropes & Gray.

Yasmin Anwar: I definitely agree, Felicity. And from a trainee perspective, I think you can always reach out to an associate or a partner and always get involved with different pro bono matters, and I think everyone’s willing to accommodate your interests in areas that you want to be involved in.

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Felicity Kirk: Something I stress to everybody who joins the firm, and I have the privilege of talking to all the new joiners—the trainees collectively but then individually with all the lateral hires—is that I absolutely do not have a monopoly on contacts, ideas or suggestions. And it’s just fantastic when people come to me, whatever level of experience they are, with their contacts, thoughts and ideas, and we’ve taken on some fantastic pro bono work. For example, one of the associates, his brother had developed an app for I call it “social gardening” (matching up people who wanted and needed to garden with some redundant green spaces), and we were able to do the Series A funding for that, which is a fantastic piece of work for our lawyers to do. So, I really welcome approaches from across the office from lawyers and non-lawyers. I’d just like to finish by saying that the trainees are the lifeblood of the pro bono program in terms of your enthusiasm, ideas and suggestions, willingness

to take things on, to have a go, and the commitment. And it’s always fantastic to see, as careers progress, that early involvement in pro bono really grow and develop and flourish.

Yasmin Anwar: Thank you so much. We hope you enjoyed today’s discussion. This podcast will be ongoing, and we really want your support.

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Yasmin Anwar: If there’s anything in particular you would like us to discuss on the podcast, please leave us feedback or send us a message on social media. Thank you.

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