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Despite Recession, Legal Community Continues Giving Back

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Special to the Legal

Ken Kolaski, a partner at Reed Smith, recently shared his diagnosis of Parkinson's disease with his firm, more than a year-and-a-half after receiving the diagnosis in March 2008.

Shortly afterward, Kolaski joined Team Fox, the fundraising assistance branch of the Michael J. Fox Foundation, and has since asked for the firm's support.

And he's getting a very good response so far.

"Ken let us know that his objective was nothing less than to see a cure for this disease in his lifetime. He has the smarts, spirit, and determination to make good on that goal, so there's no question that we'll all rise to the challenge and join Ken in that effort," said Philadelphia office managing partner Ajay Raju.

"Whether through contributions to Team Fox or by helping to raise awareness of Parkinson's, we've already seen a lot of support on both an individual and firmwide basis," Raju said. Kolaski plans to involve everyone in the firm, in each of its offices around the world.

Raju said that the outpouring of support is not only a reflection of the personal aspect involved, but evidence the firm is composed of many individuals predisposed to lending a hand.

Kolaski's story is just one of many examples of charitable giving from the legal community this season, which is still strong despite this year's enduring economic downturn.

More evidence of the Philadelphia legal community's helping hands can be seen in the establishment earlier this year of the Stephen H. Frishberg Endowment Fund at the Wellness Community of Philadelphia, an organization that supports people with cancer and their families. The endowment was created to honor the efforts of Stephen Frishberg, partner at Deeb Petrakis Blum & Murphy.

Frishberg's altruistic endeavors began after his sister-in-law died from multiple myeloma in 1985 at age 36. Frishberg began sending out what he describes as "Christmas letter" donation requests, saying that he'd run five miles if the recipient made a contribution to the American Cancer Society. To fulfill his side of the bargain, he participated in the American Cancer Society's Main Line Relay for Life.

An acquaintance of Frishberg's, whom he met through the National Museum of American Jewish History, brought the Wellness Community to his attention, informing him that it wanted to start its own fundraising race. Frishberg became actively involved and was asked to serve on the board of The Wellness Community in 1999. He also currently serves as its general counsel.

Frishberg's base of letter recipients expanded each year as his wife and three children began participating in the races and walks. His family's participation spans 25 years now, raising \$250,000 in donations over that time period and \$25,000 for the Wellness Community Fund so far. Frishberg said the endowment he started, which donors contribute to through his family nickname, "Fab Five Frishbergs," was set up to stabilize donations for a longer-lasting legacy.

Where the "Fab Five Frishbergs" write, walk and race for charity, Kolaski's firm is incorporating four "Jeans Days" (where staff members can make a donation in exchange for wearing denim to work) and is planning a Monte Carlo Night for this year's office holiday party. The proceeds will go to the Michael J. Fox Foundation.

Raju says he's impressed that Kolaski has found ways to turn his situation into something positive to help others, referring to Kolaski's pursuit of a more active role in the firm's diversity initiative to highlight how a lawyer with a serious illness can still pursue a fruitful and rewarding career. Raju said, "It's an opportunity for Ken to serve as a role model and resource for firm members who live and work with physical disabilities."

Raju also explained that while the firm realizes that the recession has led individuals to want to save their discretionary income, the firm considers it a corporate imperative to respond when need is the greatest.

Deeb Petrakis' Frishberg similarly conceded that he has found people are more reluctant to make general contributions this year, but noted that his firm has opted to

donate to charity this season instead of exchanging holiday gifts within the office.

Despite the lower sponsorship rate of the Wellness Community this year, Frishberg's letter-writing fundraising has actually experienced an increase in participation. He believes this is the case because he himself was diagnosed with a chronic form of leukemia this year, and people have been responding generously because the problem now "hits home."

Frishberg said he expects to receive more donations in the coming months because of the approaching holiday season and because the letters went out to an even larger base this year since all three of his children (Michael, 35; Rachel, 32; and Laura, 26) made a concerted effort to participate in walks this year, such as the "Manhattan Light the Night Walk" for The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society.

Frishberg said he hopes his situation brings more awareness at the board level of the need for an endowment, especially because of the current recession.

He concluded, "If people have a connection to the charity, giving will be the same as last year, if not better. If not, it's

the opposite."

Regarding other firmwide charity efforts, it's expected that corporate belt-tightening would yield lower levels of charitable giving, but that's not necessarily the case.

"Giving is at least, if not greater than last year," said Cozen O'Connor attorney Joseph Gerber, a member of the Cozen O'Connor Foundation, which oversees the firm's charitable giving.

According to Gerber, one of the firm's core values is giving back to the community, beginning with the firm's founders, Stephen Cozen and Patrick O'Connor.

As a result, the firm takes a multifaceted approach to giving that is both employee- and client-driven, distributing funds in the seven-figure range and to more than 300 recipients each year, according to Gerber. The recipients span several areas: children's

charities, educational institutions, arts groups and health societies.

The firm encourages all staff members to get involved, Gerber said, whether that means donating Thanksgiving turkeys, walking in the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, volunteering to sell lemonade for Alex's Lemonade Stand or participating in their own "Jeans Days."

The Philadelphia Ronald McDonald House, or PRMH, receives particular attention from the firm each year, both in the form of financial support and volunteer hours. Fifteen paralegals participated in the firm's second annual "Cooking for a Cause" guest-chef night at the PRMH, located at Front and Erie streets. Firm members also attended the 35th birthday party for the Ronald McDonald House on Nov. 6, held at the Please Touch Museum at Memorial Hall.

Another firm that utilizes the flexible approach to charitable giving, choosing to donate more than just money, is Eckert Seamans Cherin & Mellott, which recently announced the launch of the Jim Parks Charity Challenge to honor firm executive director C. James Parks' 30th anniversary at the firm this year.

The challenge ran from Sept. 9 to Sept. 30 and encouraged friendly inter-office competition among the firm's 10 offices. The goal was for each office to contribute to its own community at the highest rate by collecting donations for local food banks, which were chosen as this year's beneficiary.

By choosing food banks, the firm encouraged in-kind donations, from diapers to soup cans, as opposed to solely monetary donations.

According to Wendy West Feinstein, partner in the firm's litigation practice and Charity Challenge Initiative Committee head, that was the point. "We wanted to encourage donation. Period."

To ensure that no office got the automatic upper hand, a committee assigned point values for both in-kind and monetary donations and tallied the points on a per capita basis. The firm chose not to publicize which office won the challenge this year.

"We wanted to downplay the competitive aspect — the competition was really just to make it fun," Feinstein said. "The winners this year are the food banks."

The idea for the challenge was prompted by the economic downturn, which coincidentally fell at the same time as Parks' milestone

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anniversary. Feinstein said the firm could think of no better way to honor him than to create a challenge of this sort, because of Parks' commitment to assisting the underserved portions of communities and ability to inspire others to work together.

"It was incredible how many creative ideas arose from this initiative," Feinstein said. "People organized bake sales, e-mail auctions, and poker competitions," she added.

Cozen O'Connor also saw staff members that were "more eager than ever" to donate and respond to the "need indeed," Gerber said.

Harmon Spolan, of counsel and chairman of the Cozen O'Connor Foundation, related that the firm is not entirely exempt from the effects of economic hardships this year, however.

"Giving in general is down this year," he said. "Organizations have been requesting accelerated multi-year pledges."

Feinstein noted that her firm has not internally seen a negative effect on the level of charitable giving, because of the challenge.

"It seems to be important to everyone to contribute to our local communities — Jim's attitude is really ingrained in the firm's culture," she said.

While firms and individuals continue to

see strong support for charitable giving, the Philadelphia Bar Foundation offers additional insight as to the overall state of charitable giving — especially regarding events and initiatives that may not do as well this year as in years past.

"We were holding steady until about a month ago," said Wendy Beetlestone, treasurer of the Philadelphia Bar Foundation and an attorney at Hanglely Aronchick Segal & Pudlin. Since then, Beetlestone said she has had to ramp up the foundation's efforts in organizing its annual Andrew Hamilton Benefit, which was scheduled for Nov. 21 at the Please Touch Museum.

The tickets to attend the benefit this year were \$175 each, down from \$350 in previous years to encourage attendance. The cost of the ticket covers the event cost (trimmed to \$75,000 total, down from \$120,000), so that any additional giving goes directly to beneficiaries. "I've begged and borrowed to the greatest extent that I can," said Beetlestone.

Additional donations that will go straight to charities could come in the form of proceeds from the raffle, a new feature at this year's benefit. Items such as an Ippolito painting worth \$17,000, a rug from Material Culture and dinner for 10 by a world-class chef were scheduled to be auctioned off.

Another Bar Foundation initiative that encourages annual charitable donations is the "Raising the Bar" campaign. The campaign was motivated by former Philadelphia Bar Association Chancellor Alan M. Feldman's

challenge to every law firm to contribute \$300 per lawyer. According to the foundation's Web site, it is said to be the Philadelphia legal community's most significant institutional effort in support of the Bar Foundation.

Steven Bizar, co-chair of the Raising the Bar Committee and co-chair of Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney's litigation practice, commented on the low participation in the campaign this year thus far.

"What's happening is that people are interested and willing to donate, but haven't made the commitment yet," Bizar said.

He also noted that more firms are expected to pledge by the end of the year, but that firms could have their event-based contributions, such as their donations at the Andrew Hamilton Benefit, count against their overall commitment.

Glenn Blumenfeld, secretary of the Philadelphia Bar Foundation and shareholder at Tactix Real Estate Advisors, offered other observations regarding the status of charitable contributions at this time.

"We're doing relatively well under the circumstances," he said. Blumenfeld also provided an important distinction about donors.

"With people who are in-tune to the fact that the money is needed now more than ever, they typically give more, versus people who are less aware of the fact that there's less funding yet greater demand," he explained. "Or people simply cannot give as they have in the past." •