

Feature Article

Giving Back from a Distance: Philanthropic Opportunities Abound Despite the Need to Keep Away

By Marrielle B. Van Rossum



Nothing upset me more this year about the cancellation of the Young Lawyers Seminar than having to forego our philanthropic activity. Don't get me wrong—I want to see all of you, learn about how your families are growing, and cheer on your successes. But there is something about getting a little dirty and working with our hands to help another organization blossom that is beyond compare.

So what do we do now? Clearly, there is a lot of hurt in the world, and I am sure that everyone has received many appeals for monetary donations. For that reason, you may find yourself wanting to find way to do some good that is more than just clicking a donate button.

Luckily, there are still ways to give back beyond responding to your college's annual appeal. What follows are opportunities that are available to all of us.

Using That Law License

Being a lawyer equips us with tools to impact people's lives in meaningful ways, even without meeting someone in person. Many state and local bar associations run call-in lines for free legal advice. My own New Hampshire Bar Association organizes a telephone service for individuals to call and speak with an attorney on the second Wednesday evening of each month. There is no physical contact involved, and attorneys are able to talk through issues with those who need the help navigating the legal system. If you would like to see what legal aid opportunities are available in your area, visit www.lsc.gov. You can highlight an area on a map that corresponds with your community to see what services you might be able to assist.

Unfortunately, the pandemic made many unsafe homes more dangerous. Across the country, domestic violence spiked as families stayed home and stopped going to work and school. See Eve Valera, Ph.D., *When lockdown is not actually safe: Intimate partner violence during COVID-19*, Harvard Health Blog (July 7, 2020), <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/when-lockdown-is-not-actually-safer-intimate-partner-violence-during-covid-19-2020>. The New Hampshire Bar Association Pro Bono Program has the Domestic Violence Emergency Project, which aims to

assist those needing immediate court intervention, such as a restraining order. Many other state bar associations offer similar volunteer opportunities to deal with the influx of reported abuse. For example, if you are in the Miami area, look to CABA Pro Bono Legal Services at www.cabaprobono.com. To help streamline your search, check out the ABA's Disaster Relief Pro Bono Portal at www.aba.joinpaladin.com to filter through opportunities focusing on causes that speak to you (*i.e.*, domestic violence, animal welfare, or natural disasters) and based in your geographic area.

Little Touches

Like many of you, my household gained a Corona puppy. (Her name is Sally. She is a very good girl.) On our walks, we have encountered small painted stones with various messages scattered in places across town, only slightly obscured so that you might only catch it with a double take. Apparently, these are called Kindness Rocks, and they are not entirely new—it just took us getting a dog who needs daily walks for me to notice these delightful messages scattered along paths, walkways, and the main drag through town.

While not unique to the age of COVID-19, Kindness Rocks are both a fun project for those of us who may have children to keep busy as well as those of us who just want more people to smile. Creating a collection of rocks to hide like Easter eggs not only teaches kindness and collaboration to bickering siblings, but also encourages us all to slow down a bit and focus on the positive. If you need inspiration, try visiting this website for a primer: <https://www.thekindnessrocksproject.com/>.

Of course, you can go further than collecting, washing, painting, and hiding rocks. You can spread plenty of cheer outside of the workplaces of our frontline workers and schools by creating encouraging messages in sidewalk chalk or simply sending some thank you notes to people like your mail carrier, your favorite barista who makes the best curb-side delivery latte, or your neighbor. Never forget how much saying “thank you” can do.

Use Your Smarts

Children have been hit hard by this pandemic—especially children who rely on the consistent structure and predictability that the school day brings. Just as some people thrive while others struggle while working from home, many school-aged individuals are not meeting their potential while being in front of a screen. Other children needed the one-on-one support even before the pandemic forced everyone home.

What can a lawyer do about this? Tutor, and tutor for free. Yes, parents at home can help their children with homework, but having mom or dad explain a lesson can create additional frustration and tension. Bringing in a third party with no skin in the game can help the student get the attention and structure so needed at this time.

Local schools will likely have resources to connect willing tutors with families, but school administrators are just trying to get by right now, too. Look to services like UpChieve (<https://upchieve.org/volunteer>) or Brainwave (www.brainwavetutoring.org) for streamlined opportunities to give back while reliving some of your favorite subjects.

Make a Run for It

Usually the warmer months mean road races, with many of us being coerced (or doing the coercion) into joining a workplace team. These races can be big money makers for local causes, but a crowded starting line is inapposite for social distancing. Thus, lots of races have moved to virtual races and have even waived their registration fees. Locally, my firm will participate in the Seacoast Cancer Center's 5k (<https://seacoastcancer5k.org/>) and while anyone can join the run, see what may be in your own neighborhood.

If you do decide to sign-up for virtual 5k, remember that the race will not have its normal visibility and fanfare. Instead, do your best to share your participation online, tagging the sponsor and using available hashtags to help raise awareness and encourage others to participate as well.

Encourage Democracy

If you are comfortable being around other people, one of the best ways that you can serve your community is by volunteering as an election worker. Although many of us will vote by mail come November, there will still be many individuals voting in person and volunteers are usually retired individuals, most of whom are at a greater risk for contracting COVID-19. See Michael Barthel & Galen Stocking, *Older People Account for Large Shares of Poll Workers and Voters in U.S. General Elections*, FACTTANK, (April 6, 2020) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/06/older-people-account-for-large-shares-of-poll-workers-and-voters-in-u-s-general-elections/>. Most communities need more poll workers to ensure smooth and safe elections, especially as this year involves more than handing out “I Voted” stickers. There will be safety protocols in place that will need to be enforced. Contact your local municipality for information about training and volunteer opportunities, or check out this federal resource: <https://www.eac.gov/voters/become-poll-worker>.

You Do You

If we have learned anything during this crazy period, it is that life moves on and we need to keep the cogs of society turning. Most of us have (thankfully!) remained busy in our practices, but reaching out beyond the four walls of our virtual office can nurture both ourselves and our communities. I encourage you all to find your own version of giving back in a way that speaks to you and the causes the motivate you.

Marrielle B. Van Rossum is an associate at *Sulloway & Hollis, PLLC*, where she defends and advises healthcare providers and corporations in a variety of matters, including medical malpractice, employment and labor, and general litigation. Marrielle is the former Chair of the Young Lawyers Philanthropic Committee and will next serve as a Vice Chair of the DRI for Life Subcommittee. She can be reached at mvanrossum@sulloway.com.