



nerej

Finding humanity in real estate: Give of yourself and your team with pro bono work

August 02, 2012 - Front Section

So you're at your desk Monday morning, cup of coffee in hand, with a full calendar for the week. Meetings to attend, deliverables due, and you can't get your mind off the story you heard over the weekend about a family in town. Maybe it's your child's classmate, who will be coming home from the hospital soon... or a neighborhood veteran and father, learning to live life in a wheelchair.

What Can I Do?

And you think to yourself, what can I do? Fundraisers are usually underway; you can always start an office collection or give a tax-deductible donation. In today's economic climate, there are ways to give that far exceed the value of cash. Give of yourself and your team. Pro bono projects can create a distinct and creative outlet varied from the typical day to day project. And they have a way of re-energizing employees, providing a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

Launch a Pro Bono Project

Bring the story to the owners of your firm. Often the project will spark an interest if it hits home. That's how Bella Tucker and the Roarty family became part of our own. Mike Guilmet, a father, structural engineer and managing partner of Allen and Major Associates, was integral in launching our most recent pro bono project. I first contacted Mike after reading about Bella and her family of seven, in the local newspaper. Bella was eight years old at the time, a vivacious young gymnast and cheerleader in Londonderry, NH, when she contracted strep pneumonia sepsis and within forty-eight hours, doctors at Children's Hospital Boston removed all four of her limbs to save her life. Literally overnight, a typical New England family was changed forever. While Bella was recovering in the hospital and re-learning to live life with substantial challenges, neighbors had begun an immense fund raising effort to accommodate Bella's home for her return and assist in medical expenses.

Provide your services. Mike and I reached out to the Roarty family, and offered to assist in any way possible with the reconstruction of their house. And the journey began. Oftentimes families in crisis are focused on their loved ones, and a home renovation, although necessary, is too overwhelming to launch. Help them select a family member or friend to be the point person during design and construction. Essential for sorting through questions, necessary paperwork, and consolidating communication, the family advocate provides an invaluable service. Neighbors Lisa and Derek Felix of Blackdog Builders, and Deb Hubbell of JetBlue were teamed to speak on behalf of Bella's family. And as in all professions, communication is everything and open communication leads to success. We were able to design and construct in four months.

Build on Existing Relationships

Pro bono projects will transcend with the right people. Build on your existing relationships; reach out to the emotionally intelligent professional with a thriving firm to back them. The initial design idea for Bella's home was a ramp and first floor accessible bathroom. Due to grading challenges around the house, the design rapidly changed to a 3 story elevator, which meant an architect was essential. This is where Keith Boyle, Nik Middleton and Cube 3 Studio became part of the family. Already teamed on several projects with Allen & Major and having extensive experience in innovative health-care design, Cube 3 and their talented pool of architects and interior designers was a perfect fit. Keith's energy and enthusiasm further invigorated the project and his team brought the plans together in record time.

Overcome Regulatory Hurdles

Often overlooked, permitting and regulatory hurdles can pose significant challenges in any project, particularly those with little funding available. Reach out to the local and state officials, tell them what you're doing and ask for assistance. After approaching the Town of Londonderry, New Hampshire DES and Governor Lynch, we requested fee waivers where permissible, and a shortened permitting tract. Bella was coming home soon and we needed to break ground. Officials were overwhelmingly supportive and did all possible to move the project through.

Find the Right Builder

Eliciting the help of good people can quickly turn a great project into one that's truly spectacular. And that is exactly what happened when Tony Nigro, a project executive with Suffolk Construction and the Berry Fund, joined us. We went to college together; Tony lived in Bella's hometown of Londonderry, already attempted to contact Bella's family, and had an excellent professional relationship with the Cube 3 team on several health-care projects. Tony is also a dad, and this project took his heart.

When I first contacted Tony, his response was..."Let's make it bigger, let's make it better." And so, the project grew. Initial ramp and elevator designs quickly morphed into a 2,500 square foot addition and full renovation of the existing home, all built to hospital-grade specifications. First and second floor baths fully accommodating Bella's independence, kitchen with accessible counters and appliances, first-floor rehabilitation gym, hardwood floors, HEPA filtration for Bella's moderate immune system, ramps, generators and a state of the art elevator by Otis were core to the final design.

The entire renovation was constructed by hundreds of volunteers, individual and corporate. Donated materials and financial assistance from the Berry Fund completed the project at no cost to the family. We finished and the family was home, with Bella, in less than five months.

Bella's mom Selena and step-dad Pete even took the time to pay it forward, donating building materials, appliances and home goods, otherwise slated for the dumpster, to the Salvation Army and Habitat for Humanity. The project succeeded in every aspect, and then some. Bella can now move independently everywhere in the home and outside. And if she needs a little help, a state-of-the-art intercom system keeps her in contact with Mom and Pete.

How Will You Give Back?

How will you leverage your profession while improving the lives of others, right in your own backyard? Will you chose to have a powerful impact on the greater good of your community? Pro

bono doesn't always mean "for free". The value of a pro bono project far exceeds that of the dollar. The literal translation of pro bono is for the public good, and the benefits are realized, seen and felt by all involved.

Within the office you'll find the pro bono project recharges and invigorates your team, is phenomenally rewarding, and very different from the typical day to day assignment. Professional relationships are strengthened by benevolence. Within the individual, pro bono work can evoke a sense of purpose and fulfillment as well as a connection to humanity. Bella Tucker and her family of seven taught all of us how to find humanity in real estate. And this little girl never stops smiling. Will you reach out to the Bella in your neighborhood?

Jennifer Hamwey, PE, is a consulting engineer in Windham, NH.

Even though Bella's home is completed, she will continue to face challenges, overcome obstacles and require new prosthetics as she grows and regains independence. To learn more about Bella, her recent successes and to donate, please visit www.bellatucker.org

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540