

# Problem Solving Is Good Lawyering, Even If It Doesn't Always Pay

**Lawyers don't always get paid to fix things. Our reward is giving back, collaborating with others to solve big problems, and knowing we helped pave the way for future generations.**

BY DAN D. GARTZKE

I am a lawyer practicing family law – and I like to fix things. Over the course of the 39 years I've been practicing, I have had lots of opportunities to fix things, but one instance stands out.

A woman came into my office because she wanted a divorce. In the interview, I asked all the standard intrusive questions to flesh out her case. What were their financial circumstances? How is your husband with the children – will there be any issues with placement, or moving? Are there any issues of domestic abuse or mistreatment? Are there any mental health issues? Any drug abuse or alcohol issues?

All her answers indicated there were no real problems: they'd been married for almost 15 years; her husband was a good father, a good provider, came home after work, attended their kids' events, and they had built a solid financial life together, with modest savings.

I was still a new lawyer, so I asked the question, "Well, why do you really want a divorce?" The division of labor at home was a source of conflict; he was ignoring it. As a divorce seemed an extreme measure in this case, a solution occurred to me.

I told her a divorce would cost several thousand dollars for her alone, and twice that for him. The finances will be split, household income significantly reduced, and the division of labor still won't be resolved. Why not use some finances that would be lost through divorce to hire for some domestic services.

As the thought sank in, I saw she liked it. She thanked me, gathered her papers, and left.

That, to me, was one of the more satisfying pieces of lawyering I have done in my 39 years. It solved a problem, even if I didn't get paid.

As your State Bar of Wisconsin president for the next year, I will take that same approach to help find solutions to challenges facing the legal profession. One of those challenges is the shortage of attorneys in more rural parts of the state.

The State Bar already administers two great programs to address attorney shortages: the Rural Practice Clerkship Program and the Rural Practice Development Program.

The first opens up summer clerkship opportunities for law students. The second presents a unique opportunity for attorneys to relocate to underserved rural communities, establish or join a practice, immerse themselves in local life, and receive a financial stipend of \$10,000.

While these programs are promising, it will take collaboration and outside-the-box thinking to solve a significant and persistent problem such as this.

From lobbying the Wisconsin Legislature to raising funds for civil legal aid, from working with the court system to collaborating with other groups, progress will happen if we keep trying. No single solution exists – it is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted approach.

As leaders, we don't get paid to find solutions to these bigger issues – our payment is the reward of giving back and knowing we helped pave the way for future generations. Together, as a collective group, we can fix things. **WL**



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