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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS TO “HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF PRO BONO LAWYERING”

CLAUDIO GROSSMAN^{*}

This conference, “Historical Perspectives of Pro Bono Lawyering,” deals with a subject that is very near to the heart of the Washington College of Law. Commitment to pro bono lawyering and to preserving its history is evident from the moment one enters this school and sees the National Equal Justice Library. This library is an archive of important materials, documents the ways in which lawyers have striven for and brought about positive social change throughout U.S. history. You can see in its collection the numerous histories of men and women who have dedicated their lives to promoting the important values of human beings.

Our students and faculty are also seen out in the community working for social justice, contributing their time to obtaining that crucial goal. For example, we have members of our community teaching constitutional law to students in the District of Columbia public schools. A group of thirty students went to Honduras during our spring recess, to help rebuild infrastructure destroyed by Hurricane Mitch. We have students engaging in public interest legal advocacy through our excellent clinical and externship programs. And we have a whole institution here raising money to support students engaging in public interest advocacy through the Equal Justice Foundation, that funds around twenty students to work and develop skills and values required for the practice of the profession.

There are many other examples of student and faculty pro bono advocacy, too numerous to list. But we are not here just to say what we are doing as a community. We are here to explore intellectually and conceptually what needs to be done generally in the country and what we as an institution need to do in order to

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strengthen our pro bono commitment.

Today we will examine the tradition of activist lawyering in its many manifestations, from the African-American community lawyers who fought early civil rights cases on an unpaid basis, to the well-paid attorneys of large law firms who took cases through their firms' pro bono programs. We will also examine the role of lawyers in bringing about the women's rights and civil rights movements. As a matter of fact, it is appropriate that this conference takes place at the end of our Founders' Celebration for this year, in which we commemorate the contributions of our founding mothers, Helen Spencer Mussey and Emma Gillett.

These women founded our law school in February, 1896, in order to create opportunities for women in the law, at the time when there were few such opportunities. They believed that in order to achieve equality and justice in the society, it was essential to have women lawyers and advocates. They also believed strongly in pro bono work, and participated in the movement to have equal access to pro bono advocacy for women in the nation.

In the century since the Washington College of Law was founded, we have tried to follow these beliefs. Therefore our goals are not only to educate students with higher standards and promote scholarship at the highest level, but also to instill in our students a high level of commitment to service. As our founding mothers believed, we think that the law and the legal systems shape all the societal values. There is hardly a societal issue without a legal component, and we lawyers have a special role to play in promoting important values.

For that reason, pro bono activities are an essential and crucial component of our mission—so important that this year, as a matter of fact, we decided to honor our founders by dedicating our entire Founders' Celebration to the pro bono theme. In addition to this conference, we have held other events over the past several weeks that have dealt with various aspects of the legal profession's role in promoting social change, and also in promoting this idea that everyone can, from whatever ideological and political perspective, give part of their time in service to others.

For example, on April 4th and 5th we sponsored "Poverty Kills," an international conference on poverty and human rights law, where we looked at the many ways in which we can contribute to fight the scourge of our times, poverty, in all of its manifestations. On April 17th, we held the first annual Peter Cicchino Awards for outstanding advocacy in the public interest. This event celebrates the students and alumni who pursue pro bono endeavors, and created symbols of

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those who are models of commitment to public service.

But today's conference will do something more than just presenting this symbolic idea of pro bono work. We will explore and understand more as to the intellectual basis and concept that underlines the pro bono theme. We have assembled here an impressive group of scholars and activists to examine the history of pro bono lawyering and different approaches toward serving the legal needs of the poor and the disenfranchised.

I would like to extend to all of you a special thank you for being here today, particularly in recognition of the fact that this is a holy week for many. I want also to thank the audience, the size of which shows the interest this institution has for the pro bono theme.

I think, however, that the tradition of Passover and Easter, which both call for tolerance and solidarity and for identification with the oppressed, also makes this an especially meaningful time to reflect upon the ways in which we, as lawyers, work to ensure civil rights and equal protection under the law for all members of the society.

I want to thank WCL professor. Susan Carle for her intellectual leadership in organizing this conference. She has been a tireless advocate for this theme and has explored the intellectual underpinnings that are essential in order to move ahead on the pro bono theme. I want to thank you immensely, Professor Carle, for your contribution. I also want to thank David Johnson and Heather Moore, from the Office of Special Events, for their hard work in organizing this event.

Let me mention also the American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy and the Law, which plans to transcribe and publish the transcript of today's event. The participation of our students is essential for the enterprise of this law school. And I want to thank the Journal for what they are doing here and for their interest in this important topic.

And then, finally, thanks to all of you for joining us to celebrate pro bono lawyering and to reflect upon this important aspect of our profession. I am sure that this celebration will strengthen the pro bono commitment of our institution and the profession in general.