

# Chicago Lawyer®

Volume 31 Number 04 • [chicagolawyer.com](http://chicagolawyer.com)

## Closing Argument > column



By **Christina M. Tchen**  
Skadden, Arps, Slate,  
Meagher & Flom

### Giving back to your community

**T**he week has been filled with the challenging work of a busy litigation practice — brief-writing, depositions, advising a client in an investigation.

But instead of heading home on a Friday night, I am headed to Chinatown for a fund-raising dinner featuring singing toddlers from a day-care center and tweens performing traditional Chinese dances.

Another morning finds me going from an early-morning community board meeting to a federal court status hearing. And this past New Year's Eve was spent in an Iowa snowstorm, knocking on doors before the presidential primary caucus.

And why? What is the point of adding community organizations or political work to an already crowded life?

My personal interest predates my legal career. My mother showed me the way, as she devoted her energy to Girl Scouts, foreign exchange students, and passing needed school levies in our small suburb. For her, these were life-enriching activities, providing her with leadership opportunities, life-long friends, and enlightening experiences.

I have tried to follow her example, and have made community involvement an integral part of my life. We are used to thinking about pro bono efforts in terms of litigation cases or advocacy work for an individual client. But community involvement and service on a board of directors can also be pro bono. (Here, I take issue with the ABA standards, which don't "count" this work as "core" pro bono services.)

Community organizations are in desperate need of the pro bono services of lawyers — they need lawyers on their boards, they need lawyers to help them incorporate, they need lawyers to advise them when they have issues. By getting involved, you are helping reach people in need,

and are sure to meet new contacts from across the public and business sectors.

But how do you decide where to put your limited time, and often your limited treasure — not to mention your special talent?

For me, it all begins with what I care about — because if it's not something you have a passion for and enjoy doing, then it is not worth the precious expenditure.

So, as the daughter of a physician, I jumped at the opportunity to serve as a trustee of the University of Chicago Medical Center. There I have had the chance to learn about the groundbreaking health-care advances. I have seen first-hand the gentle and sometimes heart-breaking care provided to high-risk infants. And I have learned the intricacies of our health-care system, as the medical center finds ways to stay at the forefront of advanced research and medical care while also serving as the largest provider of Medicaid services in the state. These experiences have taken me far afield from my corporate litigation practice.

At the other end of the spectrum, from a large enterprise to a neighborhood organization, I also serve on the board of the Chinese American Service League.

As the daughter of Chinese immigrants, I feel a special relationship with CASL's mission, which is to serve other new immigrants like my parents, and those in need in Chinatown.

The connection to my own personal roots is strong, as I can often hear the lilt of my mother's voice or see the face of my adopted Chinese daughter in the CASL clients I meet. The joy and spirit of this community is infectious.

Most recently, I have found that spirit in an activity that has taken me back to my youth. This campaign season has found me phone-banking and canvassing after nearly 20 years.

Why spend my time, treasure, and talent walking through unfamiliar neighborhoods to knock on the doors of strangers? The answer was reinforced for me the evening of the South Carolina primary, standing in the basement hall of an African-American church, as this community of new-found friends from across the country, across the generations, across ethnic lines, joined together in delight at the fruits of their work together.

This is the lesson I learned from my mother about volunteering. It is the significance of belonging, of becoming part of somewhere, of caring enough about where you live, work, and raise your children that you want to do something to make it a better place. I cannot imagine a life on the sidelines, merely going home each night, perhaps clucking about our school system or the sorry state of health care, without being involved somehow in the work that addresses these issues.

For me, the mix of law practice and community and political involvement has worked. I'm not a golfer, a runner, or a gardener (as evidenced by the physical condition of myself and my home). So, community organizations and politics have become my hobby — my after-hours entertainment, creative outlet, and social network.

As my mother found, I have made life-long friends and had memorable experiences through these activities. I have cut ribbons to open new libraries in underserved neighborhoods; I have seen cutting-edge health care at work; and most recently, I have personally witnessed the possible birth of a new political age in America.

It has made me a part of the fabric of our community, and I thank my mother for showing me the way. ■

[tina.tchen@skadden.com](mailto:tina.tchen@skadden.com)