

Denver attorney hears pro bono call — all the way from southern Africa

BY HEATHER DRAPER
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Attorney Karam Saab, an associate at the Denver office of Atlanta-based Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton, took his firm's pro bono work requirement seriously.

Saab, who always has been a fan of travel, spent two weeks in Namibia, Africa, in May, helping a friend from college to officially set up his nonprofit organization. The nonprofit distributes solar lamps and flashlights to villages in that country that don't have electricity.

He said Kilpatrick's mandatory pro bono program provided the motivation he needed to take on the nonprofit work. "Sometimes a mandatory program gives you that little kick you need to get started," Saab said.

Elephant Energy is a nonprofit organization based in Denver and Katima Mulilo, Namibia. It was formed last year by Saab's friend, Doug Viltsack, whom he met while the two were attending the University of Colorado Law School. Both earned law degrees in 2006.

Viltsack is the son of U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, and was an environmental lawyer at Denver-based Davis Graham & Stubbs LLP before moving to Africa early this year to run Elephant Energy full time.

He didn't know a lot about Namibian law when he started the organization, so he enlisted the help of Saab, an intellectual property and patent lawyer, to help him interpret it and set up a formal nonprofit.

"There are a lot of things you can't do in Namibia, which just became a formal country in 1990," Saab said. "The best thing we came up with was to establish a formal company —, in which all the profits are fed back to the nonprofit."

Saab said the most rewarding part of his African experience was visiting the stores where the lights are sold to villagers at subsidized prices.

"Just watching the people buying the lights, they were so happy," he said. "The lights usually transform their lives."

Only 15 percent of the residents of rural Namibia have access to an electrical grid, according to the Elephant Energy website. They're often geographically isolated and must travel long distances by foot — or pay inflated costs for candles, kerosene or single-use batteries — to meet their energy needs, Saab said.

The solar-powered lights are sold at tiny general stores in villages in the Caprivi region of Namibia, which is just west of Botswana in southern Africa. Elephant Energy sells several models of solar lights, ranging in price from about \$15 to \$25, including some that also can charge the villagers' cell phones.

"Everyone in Namibia has a cell phone," Saab said. "Before, they often had to travel several miles by foot, and pay a fee, to recharge their cell phones."

In addition, the nonprofit sells crank radios that allow Namibians access to information, and cookstoves that operate efficiently and reduce pollution.

Saab said he first was inspired to volunteer in law school, because CU encourages students to do pro bono work. But his firm's volunteer requirement really pushed him into action.

"Life gets in the way if you don't get that push," he said.

Ilene Bloom, president of the Denver Bar Association, said she's encouraged



COURTESY OF KARAM SAAB

Karam Saab, an associate at Kilpatrick, Townsend & Stockton, journeyed to Africa for pro bono work.



COURTESY OF KARAM SAAB

Karam Saab took this photo of men gathering at a store where the solar-powered lights are sold.



by a rise in volunteerism among metro-area attorneys.

The state has had an increase in law firms that have signed on to the Colo-

rado Supreme Court Pro Bono Initiative, she said, and more attorneys are participating in the Denver Bar Association Metro Volunteer Lawyers.

The Supreme Court initiative asks law firms to commit each of their licensed attorneys to do at least 50 hours of pro bono work per year.

"We are also looking into setting up a new program, through which we help (DBA) members get matched up with a specific legal aid organization or pro bono case," said Bloom, who owns Ilene Lin Bloom PC in Denver.

Still, she said there's "a crisis of unmet need in Denver. We're still seeing a relatively low number of volunteers, considering how many attorneys are out there. We have some room for improvement."

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