

# When Legal Services Are Free, Impact is Priceless

From holding violent extremists accountable to encouraging entrepreneurship, alumni tap the power of pro bono.

By Liz Acas

**In her day-to-day work** as a litigation partner at Paul, Weiss, Karen Dunn '06 represents some of the world's best-known companies, including Amazon, Apple, and Google. But within a half-year span in 2021, Dunn led the trial teams for both the antitrust trial against Apple and an entirely different type of case — the civil trial to hold accountable the organizers of the infamous 2017 Charlottesville rally that killed one person and injured dozens. The ensuing four-year trial resulted in a \$26 million verdict for the plaintiffs in 2021. The jury found the defendants liable for conspiracy to commit racially motivated violence and imposed compensatory and punitive damages; Dunn had argued that punitive damages were necessary to send a message that this kind of violence would not be tolerated in America.

Dunn is among the many Yale Law School graduates making a difference at the local and national level through their pro bono work. While carrying out the legal profession's tradition of providing free services for the greater good, alumni are also keeping alive Yale Law School's long-held culture of public service. By using their skills to help people in need and advance worthy causes, they're putting into practice what they learned in and out of the classroom.



A courtroom sketch of Karen Dunn

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Karen Dunn '06 on the result of the civil trial after the 2017 Charlottesville rally



Karen Dunn



Greg Silbert



Kathryn Eidmann

## THE TOUGHEST CASES

**Abja Midha '05 saw early on as a law student** the difference that representation can make to clients in life-changing circumstances. Midha came to law school with a plan to use her legal skills to advance social justice. She got a jump start on that plan her first year, when she joined the Immigration Legal Service clinic and worked on asylum cases.

Being able to enroll in law clinics the second semester of students' 1L year is a distinguishing feature of Yale Law School, where 90% of students take part in clinical education. Students represent real clients and work on real cases, getting hands-on experience. Clinics take on the toughest cases so that students can find creative ways to push the law, according to Deputy Dean for Experiential Education Fiona Doherty '99.

Not surprisingly, alumni pursuing pro bono work years later don't shy away from difficult cases.

"They're absolutely following that tradition and taking hard cases that require grit, determination, and sleepless nights," Doherty said, "and they're doing it in service of vulnerable people."

That is true of Dunn, who chose Yale Law School in part because public service is embedded in its culture.

"The School calls upon you to give back and to understand that the reason you are getting your law degree is not just for yourself, but so you can be a leader within your community," she said.

Dunn was one of the lawyers who litigated a case on behalf of nine pro bono clients against the white supremacists responsible for racially motivated violence at the August 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Hundreds of white nationalists and neo-Nazis gathered to protest the removal of a statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee. But the rally turned violent when white nationalists chanted "Jews will not replace us" and surrounded counter-protesters while brandishing tiki torches.

The jury in U.S. District Court found the protesters liable of engaging in conspiracy ahead of the demonstration, among other charges.

The historic verdict that resulted was a rebuke to the white nationalist and neo-Nazi groups named as defendants in the case. For Dunn it was important to do the work on behalf of those victims who suffered physical and emotional injuries but also to make "a larger point that our country and justice system won't tolerate racially motivated violence."



Kenneth Ebie, Abja Midha, and Amy Bonderoff

Following that case, Dunn and her longtime partner Dan Kramer launched the Paul, Weiss Center to Combat Hate in 2024 to continue their work. The center partners with civil rights organizations, clients, and academic institutions to combat white nationalist and other hate-based extremism through the court system and legal advocacy.

Dunn is motivated in her work by the victims she represents. “These were people who were harmed physically and emotionally and traumatized within their own community simply for peacefully standing up against hatred and violence,” she said of the Charlottesville case. “Then they elected, for no certain benefit to themselves, to relive the trauma by testifying in the courtroom. I think we all experienced the verdict through them. In addition to feeling gratified and so much relief, we felt an amount of faith in the justice system that this was the verdict.”

For Greg Silbert ’99, co-head of both the national complex commercial litigation and the appeals and strategic counseling practices at Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP, his pro bono work brought him a case in which he was responsible for the very life of his client. In his commercial work, Silbert has represented a country in a Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act dispute before the U.S. Supreme Court as well as numerous companies in federal and state courts around the country.

But in the case that Silbert calls his most important professional experience, the stakes were even higher: a man’s life was on the line.

The client was Derrick DeBruce, an Alabama man sentenced to death for his role in a 1991 shooting during a robbery. Silbert represented him as part of a team that included Adam Banks ’08 and other Weil colleagues as well as lawyers from The Legal Aid Society. Weil joined the case as co-counsel when it reached the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals.

At issue for the appeal was DeBruce’s lawyer during the capital murder trial and sentencing. The appeals team argued that by calling only one witness, DeBruce’s defense attorney failed to introduce any evidence likely to convince a jury to spare his life. Lawyers who later represented DeBruce called as witnesses family members and medical experts who detailed his upbringing filled with poverty and violence. They described the daily physical and mental abuse he endured from his family, his serious medical issues, and his low-functioning intelligence — details the sentencing jury never heard.

Ultimately, the federal appeals court reversed the sentence because DeBruce’s lawyer failed to provide adequate representation at his sentencing, violating his constitutional rights.

“When we were finally able to call him and tell him that the legal process was completely finished and the state of Alabama would not execute him, that was really an incredible moment,” Silbert said.

Silbert, who also works with organizations including the Innocence Project and Appellate Advocates in his pro bono practice, described working on the case as both meaningful and terrifying.

“You make a lot of judgment calls and you don’t know how something’s going to turn out,” Silbert said. “There were definitely some nights that I had trouble sleeping because I didn’t know what was going to happen next.”

## FROM THE ONE TO THE MANY

**Seeing the potential of free legal services** as a law clinic student, Midha now sees what pro bono work can accomplish on a large scale. Today she heads Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS), which draws from New York City’s private bar and community-based organizations to provide free, civil legal services through its projects and initiatives. By working with an active network of 1,800 volunteers a year,



Abja Midha and Kenneth Ebie at the legal services kickoff event in February 2024

“It’s been an honor to do this work, and it’s been an even greater honor to do this work in collaboration with dear colleagues and dear friends.” *Kenneth Ebie ’06*

VOLS is able to serve 6,400 people annually — magnitudes more than its 22-person staff could ever reach, Midha said.

“That really goes to show the power of pro bono, in terms of that multiplier effect and how many more people you can serve,” she said.

And the impact can often be seen among one’s neighbors.

When Kenneth Ebie ’06 became the inaugural leader of an initiative to increase the number of Black-owned businesses in New York City, legal services were high on his list of what the program could provide. A study found that fewer than 40% of New York’s Black business owners surveyed said they had access to good professional support, including legal services.

“Top-notch legal advice is critical to the viability of these businesses and for them as sources of stability for communities,” Ebie said. “We want to make sure that they’re set up from the start to last and to succeed.”

As a city program with a tight budget, Black Entrepreneurs NYC (BE NYC) wouldn’t be able to hire lawyers. But Ebie had another solution: volunteers.

A few years into the initiative, Ebie created a one-time event for volunteer attorneys and law students to help people establish their businesses as legal entities. Within three hours, volunteers set up 15 LLCs. It was clear to Ebie that BE NYC had to offer more.

Soon after, Ebie heard from a friend and classmate, Amy Bonderoff ’06, who works with Midha at Volunteers of Legal Service as director of development and communications. Bonderoff told Ebie how one of the organization’s projects focused on microenterprise. Could there be, she asked, a way to collaborate?

Ebie, Bonderoff, and Midha met over breakfast. Ebie had worked closely with Midha at Yale Law School on a student committee and that history made the conversation easy.

“It was different from many business meetings where you’re trying to understand what is the angle that this individual or this organization is coming from, even if it’s not stated,” Ebie said. “Based on our relationship and this trust and inherent investment in each other, we were able to have a very candid and direct conversation about how do we get to a win-win.”

The collaboration between BE NYC and VOLS has since reached some 200 businesses, Midha said. Among them are one started by a woman who, forced to change careers after an injury, decided to turn her passion for baking into a business. Lawyers helped her file paperwork with the state. Another client, an environmental engineer who had previously worked for firms, wanted to establish her own energy efficiency consultancy with a partner. Lawyers drew up the joint venture agreement.

## FAR REACHING IMPACT

**The reach of pro bono work** can go well beyond individual clients and create systemic change through cases that set legal precedent.

Working for Public Counsel in Los Angeles, the country’s largest pro bono law firm, Kathryn Eidmann ’09 experienced just how one case can cause a sea change.

Eidmann took on the case of a disabled and homeless mother whose unpaid \$1,088 for citations — including one for truancy when



The staff of Public Counsel in Los Angeles

she was a teen — caused her to lose her driver’s license. Continuing to drive to get her children to school, the defendant racked up more charges from driving with a suspended license — none of which she could afford to pay. What she owed snowballed when court fees were added, repeatedly landing her in jail. Her case is not unusual, however. Critics of using fines and fees as punishment point out that many poor defendants are in a similar situation.

When *People v. Dueñas* got to Eidmann, she and her team filed an appeal first in the Superior Court of California and then at the state appellate court. The legal team established that imposing court fees on indigent defendants without considering their ability to pay is a violation of due process. Ultimately, the court ruled that imposing fines without considering the defendant’s ability to pay was essentially punishing her for being poor.

That win, which earned Eidmann the California Lawyer of the Year award, created a shift in the way that the criminal courts in California operate, she said. Eidmann said she hears regularly from public defenders who say they invoke the case weekly or even daily on behalf of their indigent clients — the vast majority of clients that public defenders represent.

“We’re really incredibly proud and inspired by this victory and thinking about the number of people each day that it might affect across California,” Eidmann said.

Ebie, who has since completed his time with BE NYC, called being able to help his fellow New Yorkers “the most meaningful and fulfilling form of compensation that someone in public service can receive.”



Kathryn Eidmann

“It’s been an honor to do this work, and it’s been an even greater honor to do this work in collaboration with dear colleagues and dear friends,” he said. “It’s a dream.”

Dunn emphasizes that the pro bono and commercial work are mutually beneficial.

“It’s good for people to see that you can do both,” she said. “You’re better in your pro bono efforts because you’re a great commercial lawyer. You do better in your commercial efforts because you are a great lawyer in your pro bono cases.”