

A Pro at Pro Bono

Trial lawyer Patrick Arenz works to ensure access to the courtroom for clients with limited means

BY HEIDI RASCHKE

Patrick Arenz '06 (WMCL) jokes that he decided to become a trial lawyer when he realized in high school that he wouldn't have a pro baseball career. As it happens, his sports-dream heartbreak turned out to be a lucky break for his clients because Arenz, a partner at Robins Kaplan, has dedicated his life to winning in another arena—by seeking justice for underdogs.

"I've always had a competitive streak in me and a will to win," says Arenz, as he ticks off high-profile intellectual property trials that he's had a hand in. There's the celebrity chef who sued to protect her name in a battle over vegan fast-casual restaurant chain By Chloe, and the small inventor who received a \$13.5 million settlement from La-Z-Boy after a successful verdict. He's taken on Apple, Sony, and Disney. But the work he finds most rewarding, he says, is the work he does for free.

"One of the core values of our firm is access to justice and access to the courtroom, and pro bono work has always been a core part of my practice," says Arenz, who joined Robins Kaplan immediately after graduating from William Mitchell in 2006 and chaired his firm's pro bono committee from 2015-18. "We recognize that the principle of access to justice requires lawyers to represent those who cannot afford representation."

He's handled pro bono asylum cases, orders of protection for survivors of domestic violence, and a dispute over where a child should live if the parents live in different countries.

"I enjoy that the work I'm doing requires the greatest attention and the greatest performance to achieve an excellent result no matter who the client is. In 2017, I tried a case that generated a lot of attention," Arenz says. "It was a sex-tourism case that involved a U.S. citizen who traveled to Laos, where he raped a 14-year-old girl." The defendant was never charged criminally, but after a multi-day trial in federal court in Minneapolis in which the defendant was found to have sexually assaulted the girl, she received an unprecedented civil judgment.



Buck Lewis, chair of the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service; Patrick Arenz; and Erin Law, chair of the ABA Pro Bono Publico Awards Subcommittee.

"We obtained a \$950,000 jury verdict for her," Arenz says, "and equally important, a finding that what he did was wrong and not acceptable in our community."

Not long after that case made headlines, Arenz was one of five attorneys nationwide in 2018 to receive a prestigious ABA Pro Bono Publico Award for enhancing "the human dignity of others by delivering outstanding volunteer legal services to the poor and disadvantaged."

"There are few professions that allow someone to really change another person's life forever," Arenz says. "Being able to practice law is a privilege. And it's my view, and the view of our firm, that it's not just a privilege but a responsibility to do pro bono work."

Heidi Raschke is a Twin Cities writer.

