



Photo by Dan Black

Jim Huegli talks about doing pro bono from his home in the Boise Foothills. While not working on a case, he enjoys bird watching, feeding koi and spending time “with the light of my life, Carla.”

FEDERAL PRISONER RIGHTS CASE GETS PRO BONO FIREPOWER: JAMES HUEGLI FINDS MEANING HELPING INMATES, EVADING PIRATES AND GIVING BACK

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An inmate has rights under the Constitution to find relief through the courts. But in the absence of money, those rights are lost to him. In the absence of pro bono service, the poor have no civic and constitutional protection.

– James Huegli

At 63, James Huegli has paid his dues. He litigated medical malpractice, insurance, and product liability cases around the country and retired in 2003. He and his wife, Carla, sold their belongings, bought a sailboat and set out to circumnavigate the globe. If it weren't for pirates, they would have made it.

Their seven-year high seas adventures behind them, (more about pirates later), the couple bought a home in Boise to be close to their children and grandchildren. Jim hung up his

Mediation-ADR shingle, got his Idaho State Bar license and signed up for some pro bono work with the Idaho Volunteer Lawyers Program. After a few small cases, he got a large assignment – a federal prisoner rights case that has so far taken 800 hours.

“It would be a waste not to use those skills to help other people,” he said of his semi-retirement. “One of the central responsibilities of an attorney is to do his part to see that every person has equal access to the courtroom. Unfortunately, most people don't have access.”

As a young lawyer, “I admit, I was chasing the dollar,” he said. But pro bono cases ended up giving a deep sense of satisfaction. “I found some of the most rewarding cases as a young attorney were pro bono. I still get notes from clients 30 years later.”

Five weeks into his first job, Jim took his first pro bono case, which was mandatory at the firm. He explained that the managing partners at Schwabe, Williamson in Portland were

decorated World War II veterans who “held a deep conviction that they were given two gifts, their lives and their law degree. They believed they needed to pass on the blessings they had been given. That’s the way I was taught. When it’s required, it becomes a habit.”

It is a habit that still enriches his daily life.

Riggs vs. Valdez

On a shelf in Jim’s office, among personal mementos and great books, sit three large white binders. Each one has scores of plastic sheets holding hand-written personal letters from prisoners – a corpus of woe, legal grievances, gratitude and desperation. Jim could have thrown them away, or stuffed them in a file somewhere. Numbering in the hundreds, they came from inmates he originally interviewed in the course of preparing for the class-action case against Corrections Corporation of America, a private company which operates the Idaho Correctional Center just south of Boise. The inmates subsequently sent the letters on other matters, even though there would be no way for Jim to help them. “The need is overwhelming,” Jim said, but he does what he can.

The plaintiff’s case alleges CCA allowed attacks on prisoners, violence that was witnessed by guards who did nothing, and by medical staff who ignored life-threatening injuries.

Jim said he believes that a prison sentence is punishment enough, and that prisoners deserve to be protected. “These things (abuses) don’t happen at the state prisons. They just don’t. CCA is a for-profit company and they have every incentive to have fewer guards, and spend less on medical care,” he said.

Jim joined a team on the case that includes The American Civil Liberties Union lead attorney Steven L. Pevar from Connecticut, and locally, Lea Cooper. “I’m not really an ACLU guy,” Jim said, “but now that I’m involved with this case, I can see they really are the guardians of the Constitution. People say you are protected by the Constitution. No. You are protected by the guardians of the Constitution.”

Commitment to service evolves

Jim planted the seeds for his advocacy long ago. Raised by parents who had little formal education, Jim had strong ties to his hometown of Portland, and to Oregon, where his family had lived for three generations. Before he

moved to Boise, he served on the boards of the Girl Scouts of America, the Rose Festival and the Portland Civic Theater. In Idaho, he flies very sick patients in his airplane to regional medical facilities. That job, through a non-profit called Angel Flight, “helps me understand that the path God creates for us is not within our control,” he said.

These experiences helped to develop a humble sense of public service, and an ever-evolving sense of what it means to be an attorney. “One lawyer has tremendous power. With that power comes some social responsibility to exercise for the community. We can only do so much. But if you really help people, then that’s your part,” he said. “That’s a big deal.”

Calamity on the high seas avoided, another lesson learned

Travelling also helped solidify a sense of humility and service. Jim and his wife, Carla, began their voyage around the world in 1998, Jim maintaining some law practice by using “satellite phone, email, land lines, whatever we could find,” he said. They stopped along the way and Jim flew back to the United States occasionally to move cases forward. Back aboard the boat, it was a different story.

“The daily rhythm was slow, slow, slow,” he said. “We learned to slow down and enjoy today, just for today. Today is all we are really guaranteed.”

Their journey stretched into its seventh year when it ended abruptly in South Asia. Having been warned about pirate activity in the Indian Ocean between India and the Middle East, he and Carla had to decide whether or not to finish the trip.

“We still have children and grandchildren back home,” he said. “We decided we just couldn’t take the risk.”

He explained that fellow leisure sailors who travelled in tandem along the same route became friends and decided

to continue. Those friends reported back they were attacked off the coast of Yemen. A gun battle ensued and all four pirates were killed.

The Hueglis managed to bring home photos, mementos and first-hand experiences of hospitality from around the world. “We made the right call,” Jim said.

Safely back at home, the couple continued to find treasure: “We are more grateful now than ever,” Jim said. “We no longer really have a ‘wants or needs’ list as everything necessary in our life like health, family, food and shelter, are provided.”

Perhaps Jim’s sense of contentment has disposed him to help others. Or maybe it was his upbringing, or dedication to justice. But his compassion includes an understanding that there is only so much a person can do. Then again, there is so much a person can do.

“If you take pro bono because you feel guilty, then it’s a burden,” he said. “Don’t take on more than you can handle or you won’t enjoy it. You can’t do a good job. One at a time is plenty.”

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