

Remarks of U.S. Senior Circuit Judge
Frank M. Coffin
Coffin Fellows Luncheon
Regency Hotel, September 18, 2006

This is the beginning of the ninth year of the Coffin Fellows' service to our community. Although this is a brief period, I think there is merit to reflecting on the spirit that motivated twelve law firms in Portland to announce, on Law Day of 1998, their new joint enterprise. I joined Justice Dana and our coconspirators, including Bill Plouffe, Bruce Coggeshall, and our late friend, Bob Hanson, in congratulating the lawyers of these firms in "reaffirming the highest tradition of their profession by their contribution to the single most vexing area of unmet legal needs in the state."

Later that year, on September 28, we greeted the first two Fellows, David Bischoff and Lindsay Cadwallader, helping launch them on their mission. On that occasion, I sought to answer the question: why does pro bono service have a claim on our time, talent, and resources? Here is what I said.

I began by pointing out that we were not tradesmen like plumbers or plasterers, who had no such pro bono obligation. Nor were we, though professionals, like many other professionals, such as architects and software consultants, exempted from a constant pro bono expectation.

We are most like doctors, who generally do not turn away the indigent, who land on their doorstep. But for us, pro bono is not an outlet for charity. It is part of our contract with society, which has turned over the whole House of Justice to lawyers. And we alone have the keys to all the operating rooms, apparatus, and procedures inside. Even if a person gains entry, without legal assistance he is like an ailing individual turned loose in a high tech hospital and expected to do his own catscan or angiogram.

Moreover, not only has society conferred a vital monopoly on us, but it has permitted the legal profession - bench and bar - to regulate that monopoly. This, however, is not a one way street. The price of this inestimable privilege and entrustment is our undelegable obligation to see that no one is lost in the cracks of the system, and to work constantly to eliminate those cracks. And one of the important crack fillers is the Coffin Fellowship.

Let me close by repeating the thought with which I greeted the inception of this Fellowship eight years ago. To know that the leading law firms in this community are renewing and even increasing their efforts to make it possible for deeply dedicated young lawyers to devote themselves to serving troubled families in their most agonizing times - in fellowships bearing my name - is the most meaningful honor I can imagine.