

The McDermott Difference

An Interview with Paul M. Thompson, Managing Partner, Washington, DC Office and Pro Bono Litigation Partner, and Elizabeth P. Lewis, Pro Bono and Community Service Partner, McDermott Will & Emery

EDITORS' NOTE Paul Thompson is the Managing Partner of McDermott's Washington, DC office and also serves as the firm's Pro Bono Litigation Partner. He previously served on McDermott's Executive and Management Committee and, from 2011 to 2015, he also served a previous term as Managing Partner of the Washington, DC office. Thompson represents clients in complex criminal and civil matters. He has extensive experience in internal investigations, voluntary disclosures, grand jury investigations, appellate practice and congressional investigations, with a particular focus on clients in the healthcare industry. From 2002 to 2005, Thompson served as an Assistant United States Attorney in the Appellate Section of the United States Attorney's Office in the Western District of Pennsylvania. From 2005 to 2007, he worked as counsel to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, where he worked on the Senate confirmation hearings for Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito. He has also served as a law clerk to The Honorable D. Brooks Smith, former Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania and current Chief Judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. Thompson has published articles in the National Law Journal, Roll Call, Executive Counsel, Corporate Counsel, Yale Law Journal Pocket Part, and Vanderbilt Law Review. He has been quoted in top legal and business publications such as the Washington Business Journal, The Hill, Roll Call and Am Law Daily, and has served as a panelist at the National Press Club. Thompson earned an AB degree, magna cum laude, from Harvard College and a JD, magna cum laude, from Harvard Law School.

Elizabeth Lewis serves as McDermott's Pro Bono and Community Service Partner leading the firm's pro bono, community service and charitable giving initiatives. She works closely with the firm's Pro Bono and Community Service Committee and senior management to define the Firm's programmatic mission, identify strategies for growth, and launch pro bono and community service initiatives. Lewis also regularly collaborates with nonprofit organizations on legal clinics, community service events, and other opportunities for social impact. In addition, Lewis regularly represents individual and nonprofit clients on a wide variety of issues ranging from special education, school discipline, family law, tax exemption and a variety of other tax and business law issues,



Paul M. Thompson



Elizabeth P. Lewis

and participates in numerous volunteer and community service activities through the Firm's Kids First Initiative. Prior to assuming the role of Pro Bono and Community Service Partner, Lewis was a partner in the U.S. and International Tax Group. Lewis earned a BA degree from Northwestern University and a JD from Loyola University of Chicago School of Law.

FIRM BRIEF As a top-ranked global law firm with more than 1,400 lawyers, McDermott Will & Emery (mwe.com) serves many of the world's leading companies and privately held businesses. Guided by its mantra of #AlwaysBetter, the firm focuses both on being indispensable to clients and creating a culture of happiness and excellence. In doing so, colleagues work seamlessly across practices, geographies, and industries to deliver solutions that propel sustained success.

Will you discuss your career journeys?

Lewis: I went to law school with the goal to do public interest, because my grandpa, who I adored, was a lawyer and tireless advocate for legal aid. In fact, he was one of the co-founders of the legal aid program in Ramsey County (now the Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services). In law school, I was a part of the Loyola Civitas Child Law Clinic, but after a summer at McDermott Will & Emery, I realized that I could pursue a career in big law and still find the space to serve the public interest. When I started as a full-time lawyer at McDermott, I was fortunate enough to be able to fit in a really fulfilling amount of pro bono work. For the first 10 years of my career, I was in the Tax Practice Group doing international tax planning and partnership work, doing several hundred hours of pro bono each year and eventually co-chairing our Chicago pro bono committee. When a full-time pro bono role opened, it presented a once-in-a-career opportunity to be able to focus on this work that I loved at a firm that I know and love.

Thompson: I knew I wanted to be involved in public interest work as soon as I got out of law school. After my clerkship, I served as an Assistant United States Attorney with the Department of Justice and then spent two years as counsel to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee. After almost a decade in government, I came to McDermott because I believed it gave me more freedom and flexibility to do the kinds of things I wanted to do, which proved to be absolutely true. Along

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with a billable practice focused on white-collar and government investigations, I was able to take on pro bono immigration cases and big civil rights impact cases. And I have done that kind of pro bono work every one of the nearly 18 years that I have worked at McDermott. Several years ago, our Pro Bono Litigation Partner left to become a judge, and I approached Elizabeth and our leadership team and asked to be considered for the job. Luckily for me, they said yes. I have had this role since early 2023, and I am loving every minute of it.

What have been the keys to McDermott's industry leadership in pro bono, and how do you define the McDermott difference?

Thompson: In terms of pro bono, it starts at the top – we message consistently about how important it is for our lawyers and our staff to give back to the communities in which we live. Our Chairman, Ira Coleman, does it consistently at Management Committee meetings and in global town halls. Pro bono is a part of our culture – just like you do billable work and write thought leadership and go to conferences as part of your business development, you must do something for other people – that's in our DNA. That's the McDermott difference – it really is a part of who we are, and it is an expectation of the job: we serve others.

Lewis: To me, the McDermott difference is the people. I think in part, it's a role of management and a message from the top, but it's also everyone at every level of the firm. The progress we've made is the result of a lot of small efforts that built to a larger impact. We are a very small pro bono team, but we work together with a talented and passionate pro bono committee. Together, we find initiatives and projects, both large and small, that are inspiring to our people. It's been a very concerted effort among an awful lot of lawyers and staff, across offices and practices, who continue to weave the dedication to and love of giving back into the fabric of the firm.

Will you provide an overview of your roles and areas of focus?

Lewis: In my role as Pro Bono and Community Service Partner, I focus full time on our Pro Bono and Community Service Program. My job is generally to oversee our Pro Bono and Community Service initiatives firmwide, including our strategy and relationship-building efforts across the U.S. and Europe, alongside Paul and his litigation role and, as of the beginning of the year, Jayme Cassidy, who focuses on pro bono outside of the courtroom.

Thompson: I have multiple roles at the firm: I am still a partner that does billable work. I'm also the Office Managing Partner of the DC Office. I am also the Pro Bono Litigation Partner, and my role there is to source projects, staff them, and have success for our clients. In terms of sourcing projects, I try to bring in matters for our lawyers, anything from big impact cases that involve class actions and thousands of people to smaller projects that change the lives of one person or one family – but are no less important – and a range in between. We do immigration hearings, due process hearings for kids with disabilities, all kinds of cases to help people in

need. In terms of staffing, it is my job to make sure we have the right teams handling projects so that we are bringing the best service to our clients. Finally, my job is success – we want results for our clients.

What do you see as the responsibility that leading law firms have to being good corporate citizens and to addressing societal need?

Lewis: First and foremost, it is very clear that there is a responsibility, and potentially a void if we don't fill it, in both upholding the rule of law and making sure that everyone can benefit from the rule of law, regardless of whether they can afford to pay a lawyer. There's a huge "access to justice" gap – there are so many things that people in our communities cannot protect without lawyers, and we feel very strongly that it is our moral and ethical obligation to assist in that. Access to justice is absolutely critical to the structure and functioning of our society.

Thompson: Ninety-two percent of people in the United States can't afford the legal services that they need. Those of us who are privileged enough to have a law license have an obligation to help people who might not have the same resources as others. Our rules of professional responsibility also require lawyers to do pro bono work. In addition to having this unique skill set to help those who need it most, we are the upholders of the rule of law. We make sure that the legal process works. We are the ones who become judges, who often become legislators, and who litigate cases that give people faith in our judicial system. We have an obligation to make sure that this system works, and that it works for everyone.

McDermott has a long history of engagement in pro bono and community service. How is pro bono engrained in McDermott's culture?

Thompson: At McDermott, we have an expectation that every lawyer does at least 24 hours of pro bono work every year, and many commit hundreds of hours to pro bono work each year. We also have community service activities in each of our offices. These efforts include helping to raise money for charity, making meals for people in need, or tutoring kids. Internationally, we have a program each year with Rise Against Hunger to pack meals to help combat food insecurity. We also message extensively about pro bono. There are two things that I always say to our people: first, if you take on a pro bono case, you will never regret it; and second, we won't leave you alone until you do.

Lewis: We strive to engage our team with pro bono and community service from their very first touchpoints at McDermott; it's a part of our recruiting process, our summer associate program, and our orientation. Once we have folks fully in the door, we continue to educate them about our work and invite them onto pro bono teams. Within usually the first week or two of the summer associate term, there's a presentation about the importance of pro bono work. We always strive to get 100 percent of our summer associates on a pro bono project. First-year associates are also involved in pro bono projects within their first couple of months at the firm, and Paul and I also

meet with every new lawyer once a month who joins the firm as a lateral to engage them in pro bono. I think it's especially important to engage our young lawyers in this work early to establish the habits you want to see in your career right away. Also, our lawyers recognize that pro bono is extremely fulfilling, and there are ways to balance pro bono work with a busy billable practice.

How important is it for McDermott to build a diverse and inclusive workforce?

Lewis: I really cannot overstate the importance of a diverse workforce, as it contributes to the culture and the fabric of the Firm in so many ways, not only as it relates to pro bono, but also to how we live and work at McDermott. As lawyers, learning how to work with people across backgrounds, communication styles, generations, and educational backgrounds helps you grow and develop as a lawyer. It also creates a culture of belonging, friendship, loyalty, and constant growth.

Thompson: We are building an orchestra, and an orchestra must have many different instruments to make a symphony sound the way it's supposed to sound. If everybody doesn't feel included – like they belong and can be seen and understood – the culture does not work and we cannot build the kind of teams needed to provide excellent client service. Lawyers are in the empathy business. It is our job to put ourselves in the shoes of someone else, to represent a client going through something that we likely have never experienced. You cannot do that job well unless you have a culture that emphasizes empathy, diversity, equality, understanding, inclusion, and belonging.

What do you tell the next generation about the type of careers the legal profession offers?

Thompson: When I was in law school, I tutored undergraduates who wanted to go to law school, and I would always say the same thing: the great thing about the law is that you can do so much with it. We know people who never practiced law and are in business. We know people with law degrees who coach football teams or basketball teams – actually, the head referee for the Super Bowl has a Harvard law degree and was an equity partner at a large law firm before he was a referee – there's so much you can do with a law degree. If you practice law, there are many different practice areas. If you're a litigator like me, you see so many different kinds of cases. The law opens a thousand doors, and you can walk through any of them, and you can walk out of any of them, and then go into another one. It is a profession with so much diversity, and it allows you to explore the things that you want to in your career. It allows you to explore your curiosity.

Lewis: Across the board, it gives you the tools to think, analyze, advocate, and navigate situations across industries and areas of life, including how to ask questions in a way that gets you the answers that you need. It's a skill set that is very translatable, and you may end up in a completely different place than you thought you would be. It's an exciting journey, and it opens up so many doors. ●