

The BackPage

News for Associates and Young Lawyers

'Buildable Hours' Program to Turn Summer Associates into Carpenters

Law Firms Plan to Help Build A Low-Income Home in the Bronx

BY THOMAS ADCOCK

HIGH UP IN the Lipstick Building headquarters of Latham & Watkins on Wednesday, young attorneys and administrators from 27 New York firms talked of warm days to come for this year's summer associates, and of something new under the sun — specifically in the South Bronx.

"Buildable Hours" was the eponymous topic of a pitch by Latham & Watkins hosts, associate Elizabeth L. Flanagan and partner Roger S. Goldman. After a quick meal of sandwiches, they encouraged their colleagues at other firms to have the coming season's summer interns actually strap on tool belts, leather gloves and hard hats to work with Habitat for Humanity building a brand-new home on East 150th Street for a low-income family in the South Bronx.

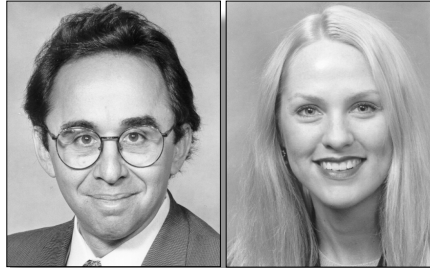
"If we get the right number of people on board, we can build this house," said Ms. Flanagan, 29, a second-year corporate associate in New York, who participated in just such an activity while assigned to Latham's Washington, D.C., office last year. "And that's amazing."

The program is the brain child of Mr. Goldman, 47, a litigation partner in Latham's Washington office, and his gym buddy, Scott D. Michel, a partner at the D.C. firm Caplin & Drysdale.

One day, the two friends were working out and "it just clicked," said Mr. Goldman. "And with the addition of Liz [Flanagan], it took off." Soon enough, nine D.C. firms had signed on to the program — "Buildable Hours," as Mr. Goldman coined it — and by summer's end a low-income family was house-proud, thanks to their own sweat equity, young lawyers, Habitat for Humanity, and volunteers from AmeriCorps.

Ms. Flanagan, a graduate of the University of Virginia School of Law, said that so many Washington summer associates volunteered last season that "we had people on a waiting list, we had to have a lottery." She and two other corporate associates at Latham's New York office — Elena Shifflette, 32, and J. Shai Ingber, 27 — mean to duplicate that success in the South Bronx this season. Beyond that, said the determined Mr. Goldman, "We have ambitions for other cities, exponential growth is a positive thing." Ms. Flanagan said they have set their sights on Buildable Hours programs for next year's summer associates in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

"We had an extraordinary experience," said



Roger Goldman

Elizabeth Flanagan

Mr. Goldman of the inaugural program in Washington. "The [summer associates] were unbelievably inspired. When they were through, they actually wrote checks to the program. I have never seen anything like it."

Roland Lewis, a former real estate attorney who is now executive director of the New York City branch of Habitat for Humanity, said the Buildable Hours pro bono program works like this:

- Law firms would contribute \$5,000 "to Habitat, in return for 20 one-day work assignments.

"We do a lot of business with corporations, but not with too many law firms," said Roland Lewis. "We'd really like to do a lot more with the legal community."

- Summer associates would rotate on a 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. shift, with 45 minutes for lunch, under supervision by AmeriCorps workers skilled in matters of carpentry, sheet rock hanging, taping and spackling, and lighting installation.

- Habitat maintains accident insurance for every volunteer worker at its job sites.

"We've had a few bumps and bruises, but nothing serious," said Mr. Lewis. "Anyway, we've never had to file a claim."

The job site is waiting, said Mr. Lewis, and the lucky family has been selected according to Habitat eligibility requirements on housing need, income level and a commitment to work on the house with their own hands, side by side with volunteers.

"We select a family, we build a house, we select a family, we build a house — and so forth and so on," said Mr. Lewis. "We're now doing this at the rate of one house every 40 minutes worldwide."

This spring, he said, New York will see its 120th Habitat house completed — with help from volunteers among city corporations.

"We do a lot of business with corporations, but not with too many law firms," said Mr. Lewis. "We'd really like to do a lot more with the legal community. It's good for law firms to be doing something worthwhile like this, showing the world that lawyers care about something besides billable hours."

And so it was that Mr. Lewis was enthusiastic when Mr. Goldman and Ms. Flanagan suggested that Buildable Hours expand from Washington to New York. "My particular genius," as Mr. Lewis put it, "is hearing a good idea and saying, 'Wow!'"

Of Wednesday's turnout by 28 firms, Latham & Watkins included, Mr. Lewis added, "I am humbled and overwhelmed."

In his own way, so was Mr. Goldman, who expected half the turnout. "Did you notice how they were writing down everything we said?" he asked. "I don't think they came here for the food. It wasn't that good."

Mr. Goldman further brought things back down to earth by telling his colleagues at the 26 other firms, "Buildable Hours is something your summer clerks can do for a day instead of having a big fancy expensive dinner someplace."

And for the small sacrifice of a single poshy dinner, said Ms. Flanagan, there are both emotional and practical return benefits.

"You're on the site working, you have little kids from the family that's going to live in your house all excited and running around and pointing out where their rooms are going to be. It's so-o-o cute," said Ms. Flanagan, an accomplished sheet rocker as the result of her experience last year.

"And then, when I moved to New York, I wound up taking this small apartment — with no closet. So I put up the sheet rock and built one myself."

This article is reprinted with permission from the February 28, 2003 edition of the NEW YORK LAW JOURNAL. © 2003 ALM Properties, Inc. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited. For information contact, American Lawyer Media, Reprint Department at 800-888-8300 x6111. #070-03-03-0037