

An UpLIFTing Experience

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Earlier this month, seven New York-based Legal colleagues were able to observe New York City's Family Court system firsthand through an organization called LIFT, or Legal Information for Families Today. With a mission to improve the city's family court system and provide educational assistance to litigants facing what is often one of the hardest times in their lives, LIFT gave the colleagues a unique chance: to watch family court judges in action through its Judge for a Day program.

Sr. Corporate Counsel Tanya Jaeger de Foras is a LIFT board member and helped organize the experience for colleagues who would not only observe court proceedings, but embody one of Pfizer's most important values: to ingrain itself as part of the community. "We work here; some us live here," comments Assistant General Counsel Katherine Yang. "I think our involvement in city institutions that are really out to make a difference to a lot of people is highly important, and it was definitely an enriching experience."

Lasting Impressions

Yang, who sat in on Family Treatment Court – a program designed to help litigants who have alcohol or substance abuse issues reunite with their children – was particularly taken with her judge's courtroom manner. "She was incredibly motivational towards the parents who had clearly been making an effort to get clean and get their families back together," she explains. "I was quite struck by the fact that it is a very high-touch kind of court. The impression is that people fall through the cracks in New York, but the desire to help these families is striking."

Sharon Forster, an Administrative Assistant who sat with a judge hearing juvenile delinquency cases, shared many of Yang's impressions. "The judge I observed most definitely cared about the kids," says Forster. "On more than one occasion she would take the time to make sure they understood exactly what was happening and would explain that this was their chance to turn things around...she reached out to them, and it was very encouraging to be a part of it."

Forster, who got to see 10 or 11 cases come before the judge to whom she was assigned, says another element that stuck out was the fact that the courts seemed simply overwhelmed with the sheer volume of cases they had to handle with very limited resources. "During one hearing, a medical file was needed from the records room and no one was available to go get it," she says. "That shows you how stressed they are."

Another participant, Louise Vignola, Supervisor, Files, Records and Archives, who observed child custody hearings, also noticed the crushing work load. "The caseload is simply tremendous," she notes. For Vignola, who was in Family Court herself years ago when working out child support and visitation arrangements with her own children, the experience hit quite close to home – giving her a true appreciation of LIFT's mission of advocacy. "The LIFT program is so important because it helps people understand what is going to happen," she comments. "I didn't have that, and I admit it was a struggle going through it. There's definitely a need for this kind of program in New York."

A Need for Advocacy

Vignola is certainly correct in her assertion that LIFT is fulfilling a pressing local need. Every year, New York City's Family Court system hears some 250,000 cases. They all vary to some degree – child custody, delinquency, endangerment and so on – but do have one thing in common: the stakes are very, very high. It's an unfortunate reality, however, that the vast majority of litigants must face, not to mention navigate, the system without the right tools and knowledge they desperately need. This is where LIFT – and ultimately Pfizer – comes in.

After the participants observed the cases, they had lunch with LIFT's Executive Director, Melissa Beck, as well as the Supervising Judge and were able to brainstorm ideas as to how to improve Family Court conditions. "Many respondents didn't understand a lot of the concepts or acronyms they were hearing in court, so we suggested perhaps putting together a book of terms so they could be more informed," explains Forster.

The early October program wasn't the first opportunity Pfizer has had to interact with, and help, LIFT with its mission. In fact, Pfizer has been a supporter of LIFT for almost 10 years and has provided it with grants and other in-kind donations to buoy its mission. In 2003, Pfizer, along with the law firm of Weil, Gotshal & Manges, donated a full renovation of the Assigned Counsel Room in Manhattan's Family Court building. Before the renovation –

towards which Pfizer provided furniture and office equipment – the room had no computers, one television and bare furnishings. Today, the room, which serves as an office for court-appointed attorneys, has all the trappings of a well-appointed office, complete with computers and printers – just another example of the positive impact Pfizer can have.

At the end of the day, however, the impact on the colleagues who participated will be long-lasting – and has affected how they view and do their jobs. “It has made me want to become more involved with programs at Pfizer,” concludes Vignola. “Working in records management is a somewhat isolated practice, and participating in the Judge for a Day program has sparked my interest in seeking other opportunities to become more involved in Legal’s philanthropic endeavors.”