

UNDERSTANDING OUR CHANGING COMMUNITY

with

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As explained by Bill Santen in the July 2015 issue of the CBA Report, the Senior Lawyers Division is publishing a series of articles, each written by a veteran lawyer, seeking to reveal who the author really is, what s/he really wants in life, and how we are going to achieve an even better community.



“Eliminate racism and empower women.”
Mission of the YWCA.

“Inspire current and future generations to invest in a more vibrant and prosperous Greater Cincinnati where everyone can thrive.” Mission of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation.

“Prevent and alleviate human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors.” Mission of the American Red Cross.

Throughout my career as an attorney, I have had the honor of volunteering with several nonprofit organizations that strive to make a meaningful difference in the health, welfare and education of our residents and the safety and vibrancy of our community. As the regional chief executive officer of the Greater Cincinnati-Dayton Region of the American Red Cross for over three years, the humanitarian mission of the Red Cross has become my priority and the driving force in my work life.

Looking back at my career and personal life, the mission has always made all of the difference.

So how did I get to the Red Cross and what do I mean by that statement?

In 1973, I entered the University of Cincinnati College of Law as a single mother with two young sons, ages 15 months and 4 years. I decided to go to law school when life took some unexpected turns and I needed to regroup and redirect my life plans. I had always enjoyed learning and done well in school and my experience in law school proved to be the right choice for me.

After graduation, I worked part time for a few years in a small law office with Tom Conlan Sr., a brilliant man, outstanding lawyer and wonderful mentor. Mr. Conlan taught me how to practice law and more importantly how to conduct myself as a compassionate and ethical lawyer. He also introduced me to his son, Tom Conlan Jr., which catapulted my career as a corporate finance attorney. After Mr. Conlan’s death, I practiced for a few years in another small practice with my brother, David Mann, currently the Vice Mayor of Cincinnati. When David was elected to Congress in 1992, I joined Thompson Hine (then called Thompson Hine and Flory).

I loved practicing law at Thompson Hine. I had great clients and wonderful colleagues that helped expand the legal services provided to my clients. The firm also respected and supported my volunteer work. My first significant volunteer position was as

a board member and then board chair of the YWCA. I was impressed with the mission of eliminating racism and empowering women and the many strong women in the community who were working tirelessly for the YWCA. I thought, “Wow! Not an easy mission to accomplish but we have to start somewhere.” One place I tried to move the needle in diversity and inclusion was at Thompson Hine. I was the first woman elected to the firm’s Executive Committee and the first woman appointed as partner in charge of the Cincinnati office. I was very honored to receive the firm’s first Diversity Champion Award in 2011.

During my time at Thompson Hine, I served on several other nonprofit boards. My volunteer work focused primarily on two areas — making our community a better place to live and helping those who are less fortunate. In 2011, I was asked to join the board of the Red Cross. I must admit that I did not know a lot about the Red Cross except for the large disaster responses I saw on the news from time to time. I got completely hooked when I heard volunteer Carl Biery talk about why he volunteers for the Red Cross. He volunteers in order to help people who are at the lowest point in their lives start to take the first steps to recovery.

The Red Cross is all about helping people. The mission is paramount, “preventing and alleviating human suffering in the face of emergencies.” After serving on the board for about six months, the CEO announced her retirement and I decided to throw my hat in the ring for the position. I was selected in May 2012 after a national search. I can honestly say that I have been inspired every week, even every day, by the dedicated volunteers, talented staff and generous donors who make our lifesaving work possible.

It’s obvious how I think we as lawyers can make our community better: Give back by getting involved with a nonprofit that has a charitable mission. Donate your time, talent and treasure to help advance a philanthropic cause you believe in. You don’t have to make the mission your day job, as I have chosen to do. But incorporating the goals of a mission-focused charity into your work and family will enrich your personal life beyond anything you can imagine. It will also yield significant benefits for the residents of Greater Cincinnati. And if you want a suggestion on a great place to start — volunteer at the Red Cross!

Smitson is regional CEO of the American Red Cross in the Greater Cincinnati-Dayton Region. She was previously a partner at Thompson Hine and served as the Cincinnati partner in charge for over nine years.