



Steven N. Williams

Joseph Saveri Law Firm; Antitrust Litigation; San Francisco

Fighting the Good Fight

Steven Williams' pro bono cases hold a special place in his heart

BY SUSAN G. HAUSER

Growing up in Huntington Station on Long Island, Steven Williams felt the inequities between his small town's Black and white neighborhoods so keenly that, at age 13, he stood up at a town meeting and spoke against a proposal to protect property values by splitting the white and Black parts into two separate towns. "Why don't we just improve the community?" he asked. "And then the property values might go up."

Williams, a partner at Joseph Saveri Law Firm in San Francisco, says, "I like the story of David and Goliath. I get inspired when I'm [fighting for] the underdog."

Like David in the biblical tale, Williams was just a kid. Unlike David, he was not hailed as a hero for his action. Nevertheless, the town-splitting proposal was never adopted.

An antitrust and complex litigation attorney, Williams spends about 10% of his time working on a pro bono basis for underserved communities—often helping people who have suffered discrimination and abuse.

Last year, he received the Bar Association of San Francisco's Justice and Diversity Center (JDC) Crystal Award for Outstanding Volunteer of the Year. He is quick to note that other members of his firm have also been recognized for their contributions.

"It has become a sort of rite of passage that, when new attorneys come into the firm, they usually will get a pro bono case," says Williams. "Young attorneys don't always get to argue hearings or take depositions. But in pro bono cases, particularly because you supervise them, they get that opportunity."

There's also the opportunity to learn new areas of law, which Williams enjoys. His first case through the JDC involved employment discrimination against an immigrant who was verbally abused by her employer, then fired. Employment law was outside his purview.

"I didn't know what to do, but I learned it, and it was a positive result," he says of the settlement he negotiated for her. "It really made a big difference in her life. It was good for me to jump in and learn that, because so many of the cases involve employment discrimination, whether age, sex or race."

Williams' own cases include the \$52 million settlement he negotiated with Facebook last year on behalf of content moderators who developed mental health issues after being required to pore through graphic and disturbing images. In addition to the payout, Facebook agreed to provide access to counseling.

But it's the pro bono cases that bring him the most personal satisfaction. In February, he heard that a former client in an employment discrimination case had changed the course of his life.

"After we represented him," Williams relates, "he took the things he learned from us, successfully brought another action on his own, and then used his recovery to start his own minority-owned [trucking] business.

"I cannot think of many things more gratifying than that." 📌

'Hey, This Is What It's Like'

Steve Williams' pro bono cases often improve the lives of individuals, but one excessive-force case may have helped leave a lasting effect on the community of Antioch.

The 2020 case involved the arrest of an African American schoolteacher and community leader who heard an altercation on the street one night and recognized her brother's voice. She stepped outside, dressed in pajamas and recovering from heart surgery, when she was taken down by three police officers.

"They claimed this woman walked to them and punched an armed police officer," Williams says, adding that they charged her with assault and resisting arrest. She chose to represent herself and was acquitted, then she sued for wrongful arrest. Williams stepped up to handle the case.

"One of the things that I was most happy about was that, as part of the settlement, the chief of police agreed to meet with the plaintiff," recalls Williams. "In some ways, that was the most important thing for her: a chance to just talk directly to the chief of police and say, 'Hey, this is what it's like, this is what it's like for us in the community.'"

Shortly afterward, the city decided to equip police with body cameras and offer implicit-bias training.

