

Love of Reading Inspires Lawyers' Project for Children

By Lorelei Laird

When Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher partners Bill Wegner and Irvin Sentilles decided to launch the firm's first pro bono project tied to the annual film retreat, they knew just what might capture the imagination of all 825 lawyers: sharing their love of reading.

After all, lawyers do a lot of reading and for many, strong verbal skills put them on the path to law school. So perhaps it was a given that the firm's attorneys would embrace the chance to renovate, restock and decorate a rundown library at Cowan Avenue Elementary School in Los Angeles, in a partnership with nonprofit group Wonder of Reading.

"We wanted to do something that had to do with reading and the joy of reading, because lawyers read all the time," says Los Angeles partner Wegner. "This [program] was unique in that it went right to creating at the elementary-school level an environment that fostered the appreciation and joy of reading."

That project came to fruition Feb. 19 when the library was dedicated in a ceremony that included performances by the students and remarks by Wegner. Principal Richard DaSylveira, Los Angeles artist Synthia Saint James and parent supporter William Young.

The new library has rare, personal touches from Gibson Dunn, including a mural the firm commissioned especially for the school.

"That, to my knowledge, has never happened in the 10 years Wonder of Reading has been around," says Beth Michelson, executive director of Wonder of Reading. "Many of our libraries adorned with beautiful murals, but that's always something the school has done itself."

Wegner and Dallas-based Sentilles orchestrated the project as part of Gibson Dunn's May 2004 firmwide retreat. The firm doesn't necessarily take on a firmwide pro bono project at every retreat, but the organizers thought it was fitting for the retreat's themes that year.

"A lot of people after 9/11 have counted their blessings and recalibrated their priorities," he says. "We wanted to do something that was centered around poetry and family and community."

Wonder of Reading fit all three. The Los Angeles organization connects elementary schools in Los Angeles County whose libraries are outdated or rundown to community partners willing to embrace its three R's: renovating a school



Photo by Bill Elliott, courtesy of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher
L.A. artist Synthia Saint James, stands with, from left, parent supporter William Young, Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher partner Bill Wegner and Principal Richard DaSylveira in the renovated, restocked and decorated library at Cowan Avenue Elementary School in Los Angeles.

library, restocking it with new books and volunteering to read to students.

To involve the entire family of Gibson Dunn in the project, the organizers made it more interactive than simple writing a check.

At the retreat, organizers had the attorneys list books that were important to them as children and made sure those books were purchased for the school.

Elizabeth Klein, an environmental litigation associate in the firm's downtown Los Angeles office, helped put together a list of children's books to get attorneys at the retreat thinking what books to recommend.

"It was actually really exciting to see everybody talk about their favorite books," she says. "You could sort of see these happy memories that people had about the books they read and how they touched their lives."

Among the books Klein recalled fondly and put on her list were Harry G. Allard's "Miss Nelson Is Missing," a comic tale of a misbehaving class of elementary-schoolers; "Anne Frank: The Diary of A Young Girl," the diary of a Dutch Jewish teenager living in hiding during the Holocaust; and poetry collections and stories by Shel Silverstein.

Irvine antitrust partner David Segal has a different perspective on children's books. As the father of a 3-year-old, he reads them every night.

"It all comes back to you," he laughs. "Before my daughter goes to sleep, I read to her."

His suggestions for the library were rhythmically

written beginners' book "Go, Dog, Go!" by P.B. Eastman, and Crockett Johnson's "Harold and the Big Crayon," about a boy who brings his imaginings to life using a magic crayon.

The attorneys received letters from the students about how excited they were about their new library, and the attorneys worked as teams to write responses about the importance of reading and their own memories of reading as children.

Those messages were bound into a book for the new library; the children's messages to Gibson Dunn are likewise bound into a book in the firm's own library.

I can't wait to see the new library because I can't wait to see all the new books because I LOVE to read!" wrote student Samirah Raheem. "I'm really happy because we won't have to sit on the rug."

Her schoolmate, Andrew Weitz wrote a poem to the attorneys entitled "Libraries."

Libraries contain
Interesting facts,
Because
At the many libraries
Reading and not
Yelling are the
Secret key, to education

P.S. I love libraries!!!

The third R in the project, volunteering to read to the students, is just getting off the ground this month, according to Klein.

After training, volunteers from Gibson Dunn will be matched up with students at Cowan Elementary, with whom they'll meet at least two hours a month to read together in the

library.

But the crowning touch of the new library was a mural that Gibson Dunn researched and commissioned for the school.

Inspired by the poem "The Rock Cries Out to Us Today" by Maya Angelou, the keynote speaker at the firm's 2004 retreat, the firm commissioned Saint James to create an original piece of artwork inspired by the poem.

The firm asked East Los Angeles muralist Ricardo Duffy to turn the piece into a mural built of tiles. At the retreat, every Gibson Dunn attorney was asked to sign the back of one of those tiles, ensuring that Gibson Dunn will always have an unseen presence in the library.

Beth Michelson, executive director of Wonder of Reading, says that her organization helps 22 elementary schools in Los Angeles each year and by the end of this year, the ten-year-old program expects to have given this treatment in 155 public schools.

In that time, Michelson says, she's never seen a community partner commission its own piece of artwork.

"Writing a check is always the easy part," she says. "It's the level of involvement that makes it special."