

Inside Counsel Website

Tuesday, February, 1, 2011



Shell Oil Co. Wins Magna Stella Pro Bono Award

Legal department prioritizes Texas pro bono work.

[Return To Article](#) [Reprints](#)

By [Ashley Trent](#)
Published on 2/1/2011

Everything's bigger in Texas. That goes for generosity, too—at least within the legal department at Houston-based Shell Oil Co.

Shell's lawyers have long prioritized pro bono work, particularly on a local level. "Houston is where we work and live, and it means a lot to us to look at the issues and help the people here," says Tom Brandt, associate general counsel.

The department's enthusiasm for community service has inspired companywide involvement in a variety of projects including Shell-a-Thon, a will and legal advice clinic for low-income residents. Developed in 2005, Shell-a-Thon is held in partnership with the Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program, which has been an integral partner to Shell's legal team for the past 25 years, says General Counsel Bill Lowrey. By 2007, more than 150 Shell employees, many of whom were nonlawyers, were participating in Shell-a-Thon as translators, witnesses and notaries. "We really come together as a legal organization and as a company through the program," says Brandt.

But the philanthropic pledge doesn't end there. Shell lawyers regularly hold veterans' legal advice clinics and help a local non-profit with legal matters. The legal department commits to 12 pro bono cases a year through the Houston Bar Association's Equal Access to Justice Initiative, but often far surpasses that number, typically tackling about 100 each year.

In November 2010, Shell's legal team received the Magna Stella Pro Bono Award, which recognizes in-house excellence in the Lone Star State. The Texas Access to Justice Commission (TAJC) and the Texas General Counsel Forum sponsor the award.

"The mission of the TAJC is to develop resources and policies that provide access to justice to as many people as we can," says Harry Reasoner, chair of the TAJC. "One of the key players in these efforts has been major corporations. Their commitment, their resources and the involvement of their legal departments have been very valuable. The Magna Stella awards recognize the companies that make this commitment."

Reasoner says part of what set Shell apart from other award nominees was the scope and depth of its commitment. "One of the things we want to do is get the public aware of how many people are desperately in need of basic legal services," he says. "When a corporation like Shell becomes involved in providing these services, it helps build this awareness."

Despite the honor of receiving the Magna Stella Award, which Texas Supreme Court Justice Nathan L. Hecht presented, neither Brandt nor Lowrey are quick to boast.

"Our efforts, in the grand scheme of things, are minor," says Lowrey. "We're trying to do our part to create a justice system in which everyone feels like they have an opportunity."