

# ATJ PRO BONO CHAMPION

## Carlos Eduardo Cárdenas

El Paso

**As president of the El Paso Bar Association, you recently launched an initiative to help connect legal services organizations with attorneys who are willing to donate pro bono time. What is the significance of this project to you?**

*This project is an attempt on my part to raise the consciousness level of the El Paso Bar about the problems facing those who can't afford legal representation. Legal services organizations can't meet the need alone — especially in El Paso, where there is a higher poverty level than in the rest of the nation. We all need to do our share and complete our 50 hours of pro bono time.*

**What are some ways this project addresses the challenges facing legal services organizations?**

*There are not sufficient resources or staff for the majority of El Paso legal services organizations. In some cases, they are forced to turn down one-third to one-half of people who qualify for legal aid. A lot of people here in El Paso are being what I like to call "denied access to justice."*

*On Oct. 31, during the American Bar Association's National Pro Bono Celebration, the El Paso Bar Association hosted the first-ever Access to Justice Fair. Five local legal services organizations, including Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Las Americas, and the Paso del Norte Civil Rights Project, attended the fair along with 50 attorneys and 500 members of the public. Lawyers gave presentations and offered one-on-one meetings. It was such a success that we've made it an annual event.*

*Also, this year every issue of the El Paso Bar Journal is highlighting a different legal services provider and recognizing lawyers who engage in pro bono work.*

**What is the most rewarding aspect of your pro bono work?**

*When you sit down with someone who thought they would never be able to talk with a lawyer. At the Access to Justice Fair, I spoke with many people who never dreamed they could afford an attorney. They come to you with their burden — and in their eyes, it's a big problem — but you can easily solve that problem and take that weight off their shoulders. It feels great to be able to relieve someone's burden and help them out. We get something out of it, too.*



**What advice would you offer lawyers who want to become more involved in pro bono work?**

*I would tell them to contact their local legal aid offices or Texas Lawyers Care, which is very helpful. There is a need for immigration legal aid in El Paso, but other parts of Texas might need attorneys to help out in different areas, like housing law or workers' rights. The legal aid organizations are out there. Contact them and help advise people who need you.*

**What do you have planned for the second half of your term in the spring?**

*I'm working with judges and the El Paso Bar Association on a project where attorneys who take on guardian ad litem civil cases could donate 10 percent to 20 percent of their fee to a legal services organization. I'm also excited to work with State Bar President-elect Terry Tottenham on his veterans' initiative. There are many veterans in El Paso because Fort Bliss is nearby, so the El Paso Bar Association is going to get involved. ✪*

For more information about Access to Justice, visit [www.texasbar.com](http://www.texasbar.com) and click on "Pro Bono."