

Weil Donates \$1.5M From Pro Bono Win to Benefit Mexican-Americans

"It's not just about writing checks or taking on matters," executive partner Barry Wolf said of the firm's approach to pro bono.

By Samantha Stokes
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Six nonprofit groups will split \$1.495 million in attorney fees stemming from a Weil, Gotshal & Manges pro bono victory, the firm said, with the money going to support legal education and other causes for Mexican Americans.

Weil won the fee award in 2017 after successfully challenging an Arizona state statute that would have eliminated Mexican American studies courses in Tucson public schools. The firm is donating the funds to The Innocence Project, The National Latino Education Research and Policy Project, The Seattle University School of Law Fred T. Korematsu Center for Law and Equality, The University of Arizona's Center for the Studies of Higher Education "Semillas del Pueblo" program, and the University of Colorado Law School Leaders in Law and Community program.

In an interview, Barry Wolf, Weil's executive partner and chair of the firm's management committee, said its pro bono and philanthropy committees worked together to decide how the financial windfall from the Arizona case could have the most positive impact. Since the case involved the education and civil rights of Mexican Americans, he said the firm always intended to use the money to support similar issues affecting the Mexican American community.



Photo: Jason Doty/ALM

"One of the elements of our culture is giving back," he said. "We wanted to be strategic [with the donations] so they could have the maximum impact possible."

In the months following the case, Wolf said the two committees established a closed process in which various nonprofits were invited to submit proposals for how they would use a donation to benefit the Mexican American community.

"We wanted to contribute the money back to the issues coming up in this particular matter—Mexican American education and legal justice," he said. We thought it was appropriate, since the fees were awarded in a civil rights case involving Mexican Americans, we wanted to support causes related to that."

According to the firm, the six organizations chosen “are focused on cultivating the next generation of ethnic studies educators and civil rights advocates, as well as furthering policy and research, with emphasis on the Mexican-American community.” Weil has dispersed all of the charitable contributions.

- Equal Justice Works will use \$250,000 to create two, two-year fellowships to focus on civil legal needs of Mexican Americans and support a pipeline for Mexican American law students to become public interest leaders.
- The Innocent Project will use \$250,000 to represent clients in the Mexican American community.
- The National Latino Education Research and Policy Project will use \$195,000 to develop a middle school curriculum focused on Mexican American studies and inclusivity of marginalized populations.
- The Seattle University School of Law Fred T. Korematsu Center for Law and Equality will use

\$150,000 to create fellowships that advance social justice for members of disempowered communities.

- The University of Arizona’s Center for the Study of Higher Education “Semillas del Pueblo” program will use \$400,000 to support Mexican American studies teachers.
- The University of Colorado Law School Leaders in Law and Community program will use \$250,000 to recruit and support law students with a connection to the Mexican American community.

A federal judge in the District of Arizona **ruled in 2017** that Tuscon public school officials were motivated by racial animus in their decision to end Mexican American studies programs in their schools. Weil, led by partner Steven Reiss and retired partner Jim Quinn, represented the plaintiffs.

Samantha Stokes, based in New York, is a staff reporter at American Lawyer covering the business of law. You can reach her at [sstokes@alm.com](mailto:ssokes@alm.com) or on Twitter: [@stokessamanthaj](https://twitter.com/stokessamanthaj)