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Lawyer finds unique way 'to make a difference'

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Sharon E. Calhoun will leave behind Chicago's wintry temperatures when she travels next week to South Africa to do pro bono work for two human rights organizations.

The weather forecast for Cape Town calls for sunny skies and 80 degree-plus temperatures, said Calhoun, an associate with Barack, Ferrazzano, Kirschbaum & Nagelberg LLP.

"If nothing else, I'm looking forward to that," Calhoun, who grew up in Chicago, said of the warmer weather.

Calhoun will take a six-month unpaid leave of absence from Barack, Ferrazzano and split her time working for the Women's Legal Centre and the South African Human Rights Commission.

"It's something I would say came after a lot of soul searching," Calhoun said, adding she enjoys working for the firm. "It's kind of a happy medium between going to work full-time for a pro bono organization and being able to remain at one of the best firms in Chicago."

Calhoun, 32, has worked as an associate at Barack, Ferrazzano since receiving her Illinois law license in November 2007.

She performs work for the firm's general litigation and automotive practice groups. She also serves on the its pro bono committee. In that capacity, Calhoun has primarily represented children as a guardian ad litem in the Cook County Circuit Court's Child Protection Division.

After taking the Illinois bar exam and before starting work at Barack, Ferrazzano, Calhoun visited South Africa.

"Politically, it's a fascinating country," Calhoun said. "It has one of the youngest and most progressive constitutions in the world."

Calhoun said when she decided to pursue a pro bono project of this magnitude she searched for options online. She said she wanted to spend an extended period abroad, particularly in South Africa. She said she will pay for the endeavor herself.

Randolph N. Stone, a clinical law professor at the University of Chicago Law School, said he helped Barack, Ferrazzano establish its pro bono program several years ago. He got to know Calhoun as a member of the pro bono committee.

"It should be a great learning experience for her as well as an opportunity to make a difference," Stone said of Calhoun's time in South Africa.

Richard S. Nikchevich, a Barack, Ferrazzano partner, acts as one of Calhoun's mentors at the firm.

"I appreciate that she will have a near-term financial sacrifice, but ultimately I believe it will prove very rewarding to her," Nikchevich said. "She will have both the opportunity to serve the poor and expand her legal skills."

Calhoun grew up in Chicago's Beverly neighborhood on the South Side as the youngest of five children. She graduated from Lincoln Park High School.



Ben Speckmann

Barack, Ferrazzano, Kirschbaum & Nagelberg LLP associate Sharon E. Calhoun leaves Chicago Tuesday and heads for South Africa to do pro bono work for the Women's Legal Centre and the South African Human Rights Commission.

Calhoun attended the University of Virginia and received her bachelor's degree in finance in 2001. She then worked for three years as a project manager at a finance company in suburban Philadelphia.

But Calhoun said she sought a more challenging career and one in which she could better use her communication skills. So after discussing the situation with a friend attending law school, Calhoun took the Law School Admission Test.

New York University School of Law accepted her and Calhoun graduated from there in May 2007.

After her initial year of law school, Calhoun worked for a summer at the Chicago Legal Clinic doing immigration work at its Pilsen office.

Calhoun said she's passionate about and has an intellectual curiosity regarding the work she will do in South Africa.

Beginning on Jan. 16, Calhoun will work for the Women's Legal Centre, which seeks to achieve equality for women in South Africa, and the South African Human Rights Commission, which promotes human rights.

Calhoun expects to assist the Women's Legal Centre with litigation involving constitutional issues and help the human rights commission with legislation and litigation.

Candice C. Jones, a program director with the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and Calhoun attended New York University law school at the same time. The two also worked for

a year together at Barack, Ferrazzano.

"I think (Calhoun has) really honed her skills representing corporate clients and so I think this is a great opportunity to take that work ethic and professionalism to the public sector," Jones said.

Calhoun's anticipated pro bono work in South Africa is "a testament to her and it's also a testament to the firm for allowing her this opportunity," Jones said.

Barack, Ferrazzano encourages its about 100 lawyers to work on pro bono matters and allows attorneys up to 100 hours each year of billable hour credit for work on such matters.

A number of lawyers from across the firm participate in the pro bono program, said Edward F. Malone, a Barack, Ferrazzano partner and member of the firm's pro bono committee.

Barack, Ferrazzano officials are excited and "very positive" about Calhoun's pro bono work in South Africa, Malone said.

While Barack, Ferrazzano does not have a policy regarding leaves of absence, Calhoun said she expects to return to the firm in June.

Calhoun said she continues "transitioning her cases to other lawyers and making sure all the loose ends are tied up."

Calhoun said she believes this is the right time for a stint in a foreign country and plans to leave on Tuesday.

"I realized that if I do that (take a leave of absence), it has to be now," Calhoun said. "I'm not at that point with marriage and kids."