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Lobbyists Can Boast of Their Share of Good Deeds

By Jeffrey H. Birnbaum
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Joel Wood is best known as a co-founder of Red Hot & Blue, the Washington area's most successful barbecue franchise. He's also the top lobbyist for the Council of Insurance Agents and Brokers, an obscure but powerful trade group.

But his heart and a lot of his time are devoted to pleading on Capitol Hill for funds to eradicate Duchenne's syndrome, a deadly form of muscular dystrophy that his 8-year-old son James was diagnosed with five years ago.

Since then, Joel and his wife, Dana Wood, who is also a professional lobbyist, have persuaded lawmakers to appropriate \$25 million in research grants, including \$4 million this year. And through their Foundation to Eradicate Duchenne, they have raised millions more. The Foundation's annual dinner, Dining Away Duchenne, is organized with the help of Wood's fellow restaurateurs in the region.

It's pro bono lobbying, however, that has produced the most help. Within a month of James's diagnosis, 25 financial-services lobbyists, many of them Wood's rivals in the normal course of events, were meeting together to pool their congressional contacts. Duchenne's, once a largely neglected disease, is now being studied vigorously and with solid federal backing thanks to the lobbyists' efforts.

"I've got a wonderful employer and extraordinary friends," Wood said. "Dana and I are incredibly blessed that we both are lobbyists."

That's a rare statement in the era of Jack Abramoff; lobbyists have never been more maligned. What's more, one person's charity can be someone else's "pork." The prime vehicles for lobbyists' generosity are earmarks -- the giveaways in appropriations bills made infamous this year by the Bridge to Nowhere.

Nonetheless, lobbyists produce a lot of good works. They spend thousands of hours each year donating their services to charitable causes. Food banks, community centers and homeless shelters have been funded through congressional action as a result.

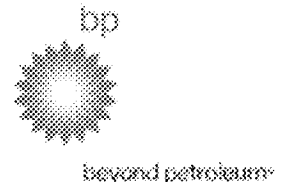
What better time than the holiday season to acknowledge these wonderful, pro bono deeds?

One campaign has literally brought smiles to faces of children. Operation Smile Inc. repairs children's facial deformities around the world. Since the autumn of 2004, Patton Boggs partner Ed Newberry and associate Billy Wynne have guided the group's congressional lobbying free of charge. Last July, with the assistance of an appropriation that Patton Boggs lobbied to get, Operation Smile performed reconstructive surgery on 41 Iraqi children in Amman, Jordan. Thanks to a new appropriation, the organization will soon be treating other needy Iraqi children.

Closer to home, Sarah G. Vilms and John F. Jonas, also of Patton Boggs, provided lobbying for the Lab School of Washington, a renowned educator of children and adults with learning disabilities. The lobbyists secured federal funding for the Lab School, including for its well-regarded program to train District teachers in the latest in educational methods and technologies.

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DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary has volunteered to spearhead efforts to gain federal financing for a new Capital Area Food Bank warehouse. Partner William H. Minor and others in the firm also helped the D.C. Food Bank secure a new \$ 1.3 million appropriation. Meanwhile, the Maryland Food Bank, which serves the Baltimore area, received \$300,000 in the same legislation with help from Marta D. Harting, a partner in the firm's Baltimore and Annapolis offices.

For the first time, the U.S. Olympic team will have a chance to medal in pairs ice dancing thanks to pro bono lobbying by a team led by Barney J. Skladany Jr. at Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld. Tanith Belbin, the 21-year-old ice skating phenom, would have been barred from the U.S. team were it not for a provision that Skladany got inserted in an appropriations bill this year. Belbin, who's from Canada, will be able to get her U.S. citizenship in time to compete with her partner Ben Agosto in the winter games in Turin, Italy, in February.

Since 2003, a team of Arent Fox lawyers, including Stacy Harbison, Melissa Thomas, Brandi Richardson and Jon Bouker, has labored without pay to clear the way for appropriations that would benefit Second Chance Employment Services, a District-based organization that specializes in finding jobs for financially at-risk women. Building on past appropriations totaling \$1.9 million, the lobbyists helped bring the program \$550,000 in appropriations this year.

James D. Bond won the Bronze Star as a soldier in Vietnam with the 101st Airborne Division. Now, as a lobbyist for Arlington-based Collins and Company Inc., he has worked with the federal bureaucracy to make it possible for the nonprofit Vietnam Assistance for the Handicapped to provide prostheses and wheel chairs to people injured by landmines in that country.

At Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal, senior managing director Todd Weiss has begun what he knows will be the long lobbying campaign in Congress to obtain funding to fight a rare liver disease called Glycogen Storage Disease Type 1. The son of one of Weiss's childhood friends, David Feldman, a dentist in Connecticut, was diagnosed with the illness three years ago. Weiss has raised private money so far and hopes next year to win some public money, too.

Public money has already been arranged by Timothy May of Patton Boggs to help the Council for Court Excellence get a grant that will aid in the reform of the D.C. Family Court. Efforts are also underway, for free, by lobbyists at Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice to help N Street Village, a nonprofit social service center that assists homeless and low-income D.C. women find jobs and housing. Leroy Jones Jr. of Andrews & Bowe, an African American-owned law and lobbying firm, is continuing to develop ways for individuals and small-business owners to combat predatory lending and abusive debt collection practices.

For Joel and Dana Wood, 2005 has been a tough year to wrangle federal aid. But they aren't close to giving up. James' life depends on their lobbying energies. They will persist in their campaign to raise money for and awareness of Duchenne's disease. "It's very frustrating," Wood said. "It's not easy money."

Nor should it be, really. But for a good cause they, and many of their K Street colleagues, are eager to lend a hand.

Happy Holidays to all, and have a healthy and prosperous New Year!

Jeffrey Birnbaum writes about the intersection of government and business every other Monday. His e-mail address is iskstreetconfidential@washpost.com.

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