



LAWYERS WHO LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Joel Kurtzberg



AS A CHILD OF TWO

attorneys who ran a family-law practice, Joel Kurtzberg grew up hearing about the law over dinner and about cases at bedtime—upon his request. So it was no surprise he grew up thinking he would follow his parents into practice.

Those family discussions also sparked an interest in social justice. Before attending Harvard Law School, he spent two years with Teach for America at a junior high school in a poor New Orleans neighborhood.

“At some point, I had questions about whether I wanted to be a lawyer and looked into other things, but then I realized law was right for me,” said Kurtzberg, a 47-year-old partner and commercial litigator at Cahill Gordon & Reindel.

Soon after arriving at Cahill in 1997, Kurtzberg joined a colleague to help coach Brooklyn Tech High School’s mock trial and moot court teams, eventually heading up the effort. One of the students Kurtzberg coached is now a Cahill associate.

Searching for organizations that needed pro bono help, Kurtzberg discovered Sanctuary for Families, which helps domestic violence victims. “They have often been controlled and pushed around their entire lives. The law can be a powerful tool in correcting this power imbalance and bringing them justice,” he said.

Over time, Sanctuary for Families became a main pro bono client for Cahill, and

Kurtzberg oversees the work by his fellow attorneys.

Kurtzberg’s pro bono work and his early teaching job dovetailed last year, when Teach for America Founder Wendy Kopp urged him to take up the case of Debra Fisher, an occupational therapist at the Manhattan School for Children, was suspended from her job for “theft of services” after she answered emails during the day about a fundraising effort she organized to

help a student with cerebral palsy publish a book—an effort previously approved by the school. Kurtzberg helped Fisher get reinstated with back pay and prompted the Department of Education to reform its investigative process.

“When we dug deep, it was clear that the system they had for doing these investigations was severely flawed, he said. “Investigators formed conclusions regardless of what the facts were going to show, and nobody within the Department of Education was overseeing their work in any substantive way.”

Kurtzberg’s work as a litigator also was a good match with his volunteer work with the media law committees for the New York City Bar Association and American Bar Association. He was part of a legal team that successfully represented Amarin Pharma Inc. in First Amendment litigation with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

—Len Maniace