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WTO Foundation does more than write checks



KATHLEEN LAVINE | BUSINESS JOURNAL

Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell volunteers — such as (left to right) Connie Proulx, Marketing Director; Liz Martinez; Patrick Kunkler; and Jack Trigg — regularly cook and serve breakfast at The Gathering Place, a daytime shelter for indigent women and children in the Denver area.



**Medium
Business**

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BY SCOTT BASSETT / DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

Denver law firm Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell LLP has become one of the best complex civil litigation firms in the nation, Chairman Mike O'Donnell said. But, he added, it wouldn't be without its charitable foundation.

"I don't think you can be a first-rate institution without looking out for your community, too," he said.

Inspired by his father's philanthropic ventures, O'Donnell urged his firm to start

a nonprofit, charitable foundation.

The WTO Foundation incorporated in 2005 and since has donated \$545,000 to more than 50 charities, said Connie Proulx, WTO marketing director and foundation executive director.

O'Donnell said firm employees want to do more than just write checks — they also like to serve as volunteers at charity events.

"When I first tell them [the charities] this, they're always a little surprised because it's like, 'OK. And you want to give us money too? Sure,'" he said.

For example, the foundation gave about \$11,000 to The Gathering Place, the only daytime shelter for indigent women and children in the Denver area.

But firm members, friends and family also did more, cooking

Denver law firm employees give of their time, too

eight hot breakfasts last year — featuring a full menu of eggs, bacon, fruit and oatmeal — for those at the shelter.

WTO volunteers serve more than 100 homeless, impoverished clients at these periodic breakfasts, said Leslie Foster, president and CEO of The Gathering Place.

"It's really meaningful to people," she said. "The idea of getting waited on and placing your order is really huge. These are not folks who hang out in restaurants, and it's really a cool thing that they get to have it their way."

WTO also donated a piano that partners and employees play during breakfasts and other events. Last year, WTO sponsored a gift shop around the holidays where women could pick out toys and get them gift-wrapped.

"You know, on hot breakfast day and on WTO day, I think there is a marked difference in the mood of the women," Foster said. "You're talking about starting your day off right."

The WTO Foundation donated to about 40 nonprofits in 2009.

O'Donnell said the decision to give back is simple.

"It's a no-brainer," he said. "Helping people — if you look at the folks we're helping — I don't think any sane person would argue whether or not that's the right thing to do."

About two-thirds of the foundation's donations go to legal-related organizations, such as the Legal Aid Foundation of Colorado (\$19,000) and \$4,000 each to the Colorado Judicial Institute and the American Civil Liberties Union, Proulx said.

WTO also supports its lawyers' efforts to provide pro bono work on issues they are passion-

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chariman, Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell LLP

of their own choice, up to \$100.



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Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell employees cook and serve breakfast at The Gathering Place. WTO volunteers in the back row are: John Vaught; Hugh Gottschalk, Managing Partner; Jerri Wheatley; Kaidan Nguyen; and Connie Purdy, with ladies who were served breakfast.

ate about, such as civil and voting rights.

In 2009, 87 percent of WTO's 130 employees donated a total of \$112,000 to the foundation, Proulx said.

The foundation also raises money through an annual in-house auction; the 2009 incarnation raised \$30,000. The firm now has 135 employees, and O'Donnell said he wouldn't be surprised if 90 percent get involved with foundation activities this year.

The foundation also matches employee contributions to charities,

Other foundation donations:

- \$12,000 in food and cash to the Denver Bar Association's food drive in conjunction with the Food Bank of the Rockies.

- \$11,000 to Urban Peak.

- \$20,660 for Haiti earthquake relief, going to such organizations as Doctors Without Borders, the Yéle Haiti Foundation and the American Red Cross, Proulx said.

No matter how O'Donnell and the firm contribute their time, experience and cash, it's important that they conduct themselves in a wise manner, he said.

"What we're trying to create is sort of a firm mantra, and try to do the right thing in the smartest way," he said. "And the right thing is always to help others that need it."

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