

Law firms get creative offering assistance to Japanese victims

Julie Kay [All Articles](#)

Daily Business Review

| March 25, 2011



Tsunami evacuees

Photo by Bloomberg News



Siobhan Helene Shea

When Jupiter attorney Siobhan Helene Shea saw a Facebook posting from her former classmate Ariyah Okamoto, who was trapped in Japan after the earthquake and tsunami, she and other classmates sprung into action.

Okamoto and his brother, Shemaiah, grew up in Miami and attended South Miami High School and the University of Miami. Ariyah worked at the Miami-Dade clerk's office before he emigrated to Japan last year to help care for his 82-year-old mother, who has Alzheimer's. Shemaiah has lived in Japan for two decades. Their Japanese father converted to Judaism and moved to Miami to become a rabbi after World War II.

The Facebook postings from the Okamotos' cellphone were grim: "bodies are washing ashore," "we're trapped" and "there is no food to eat."

Shea, former president of the Palm Beach chapter of the Florida Association for Women Lawyers and former chair of The Florida Bar's appellate practice section, banded together with other former high school classmates to help the Okamotos. They coordinated logistics, checked ferry and plane schedules when bridges washed out and gas was in short supply, and called the U.S. State Department to provide updates to the Okamotos.

Their efforts helped the brothers and their families find a way out of Sendai, which flooded up to five miles inland. They've been booked on flights to Seoul this weekend.

"We just wanted to let them know there are people out there who care about them," said Shea, whose friendship with Ariyah dates back to the gifted program in middle school.

Naming Rights

South Florida may be across the world from Japan, but local lawyers and law firms have been doing their part to help those devastated by the March 11 disaster.

Coral Gables personal injury attorney Spencer Aronfeld's nonprofit group Lawyers to the Rescue is holding a silent auction and benefit Wednesday at Sakura, a Coral Gables Japanese restaurant. Donors include a plastic surgeon who is offering Botox; the Miami Heat, which donated autographed basketballs; a personal trainer who donated fitness sessions; and Books & Books, which gave gift certificates. More donors are being sought.

Anyone who makes a donation will have a sushi roll dedicated in his or her name. Five dollars of a \$12 sushi roll will benefit the Japanese victims.

"For instance, one of the donors is gay, so we will have a rainbow roll in his name," Aronfeld said. "We have a Canadian sponsor, so one roll will have Canadian bacon in it."

Aronfeld of Aronfeld Trial Lawyers founded the nonprofit Lawyers to the Rescue after last year's earthquake in Haiti. The group has an office at Camillus House that provides pro bono legal assistance to the homeless and also works with Habitat for Humanity. The group held a similar fundraiser at a Peruvian restaurant last year and raised \$10,000 for a Haitian hospital.

"Lawyers need to improve their reputation in this town," Aronfeld said. "I wanted to do what Doctors Without Borders does."

He said his efforts have been hampered by the fact that many lawyers were out of town for spring break.

Payroll Deductions

Morgan Lewis & Bockius, which has an office in Miami, donated \$100,000 to Japan relief efforts and is permitting employees to designate donations to be deducted from up to three paychecks. The funds will be turned over to the American Red Cross, which is assisting in Japanese relief efforts.

Morgan Lewis announced last week it would be closing its Tokyo office "for the time being" to permit its personnel to attend to their families. Holland & Knight also launched a relief effort coordinated with the American Red Cross. The firm will match up to \$100,000 in donations from individual attorneys through its Casual for a Cause day at its 18 U.S. offices. Attorneys and staff contribute at least \$5 on Fridays in exchange for dressing in casual attire.

"As news of Japan's disaster emerged, we examined ways we could assist the relief efforts in a meaningful way," Holland & Knight managing partner Steven Sonberg said in a message to employees. "Please consider supporting this endeavor by contributing to the Holland & Knight Charitable Foundation to benefit the American Red Cross."

Greenberg Traurig also launched a firmwide relief effort and will contribute \$50,000 through its philanthropic fund. An additional \$50,000 is expected from attorneys, CEO Richard Rosenbaum said in a statement. The firm similarly donated \$100,000 following the Chilean earthquake and \$150,000 from its philanthropic fund and attorneys following Haiti's earthquake.

"While financial contributions alone seem somewhat impersonal to us and we may do more in the future, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked that, for now, care packages not be sent directly and we are honoring this request," Rosenbaum said. "Our hearts are with the people of Japan and their families worldwide."

Julie Kay can be reached at (305) 347-6685.