

## 33 Years, 152 People, 1 Goal: How a Pro Bono Matter Became Ingrained in the Fabric of Ropes & Gray

By Brenda Sapino Jeffreys

### What You Need to Know

- Lawyers from Ropes & Gray helped a client convicted of a double murder in Maryland secure a governor's pardon.
- The firm devoted more than 33 years to the pro bono matter, the longest-running ever for Ropes.
- Two associates still working on the matter first touched the case when they were summer associates.

Ropes & Gray devoted more than 33 years and 16,591.25 hours by 152 timekeepers on a pro bono matter that culminated with then-Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan pardoned a client who served 32 years in prison, including 10 on death row, for crimes he did not commit.

The work for John Huffington, of Baltimore, is the longest-running pro bono matter ever handled by the firm.

"This really is a testament to the firm and how seriously it takes its commitment to justice," said Chong Park, a partner in Washington, D.C., who has been

the lead lawyer for Huffington since 2015.

But the long-running pro bono matter also provided extensive training opportunities for associates who cycled through over the years, something apparent to two associates who were highly involved in the case over the last few years.

Adam Safadi said he and fellow Washington, D.C., associate Ryan Brunner are "just the latest in a long line of people at Ropes & Gray that have stuck with it since 1989."

Safadi and Brunner said the Huffington matter provided them with the chance, early in their careers, to help prepare the case for trial, work on potential plea deals, and interact directly with a client and opposing counsel.

The firm got involved in Huffington's case when partner David Stewart, now retired, brought the matter with him when he joined from another firm in Washington, D.C.

In 1981, Huffington was convicted of two counts of first-degree



Courtesy photo

**John Huffington, left, a Ropes & Gray pro bono client, and Chong Park, right, a partner in Ropes & Gray's Washington, D.C., office.**

murder. In 2013, DNA testing proved that the hair found at the crime scene was not Huffington's, and a court granted Huffington's petition for a writ of actual innocence, vacated his murder conviction and ordered a new trial.

When Park, a commercial litigator, came on the case Huffington had been released from prison, was in a halfway house and was preparing for the new trial.

But, in 2017, Huffington submitted an *Alford* plea, which is an agreement where the criminal defendant pleads guilty to a charge, but at the same time maintains

innocence, and claims the plea is in the defendant's best interest. That limited Huffington's sentence to the 32 years already served.

"He was free of the system, but we were very dogged in the pursuit of justice that was not complete," Park said, adding that at that point, the firm's team decided to file an ethics complaint on Huffington's behalf against the former state's attorney for Harford County, Joseph Cassilly.

The ethics complaint went to the Maryland Attorney Grievance Commission, and ultimately the Supreme Court of Maryland, then called the Maryland Court of Appeals, disbarred the prosecutor, finding Cassilly had lied to the court and deliberately concealed exculpatory evidence.

In 2021, the firm filed an application for a pardon for Huffington, with Hogan granting it just days before he was scheduled to leave office.

"Finally, thank goodness, Gov. Hogan did the right thing," Park said.

Huffington, the corporate social responsibility director for Holdings Management Co. and vice president and chief operating officer for the Kinetic Capital

Community Foundation, said he will seek compensation available to exonerees under Maryland's Walter Lomax Act.

Safadi and Brunner are on the team assisting with the application for compensation, they said. Nearly seven years earlier, as summer associates, they began their long involvement in the Huffington matter.

That summer, Safadi said, Park asked him to research Maryland ethical rules for a possible ethics complaint against the prosecutor, but work on the case was continuing with a fairly large team when he and Brunner joined the firm in 2017.

"We were actually gearing up for the retrial at that point still and in discussions with the prosecutor over potential plea agreements," Safadi said.

Brunner said his summer assignment on the case in 2016 was researching possible plea deals, and the next year, when they joined the firm, Huffington ultimately entered the *Alford* plea.

"After the *Alford* plea and all of that was resolved, we worked to finalize the ethics complaint against the prosecutor," Brunner said, noting that it was filed in 2018.

They helped Park prepare to testify at the ethics proceeding, and after the prosecutor was disbarred, they helped prepare a pardon application in late 2021.

"We worked on ushering that pardon application through the governor's office," he said.

Brunner said he joined Ropes in part because of its commitment to pro bono. Similarly, Safadi said it was inspiring as a summer associate to see the firm's commitment to pro bono, because people had worked on the case for years.

Despite the many hours he spent on the matter, Park said he never got a single question from anyone at the firm about why they were spending firm resources on the case.

Over the many years, Park said, lawyers and professionals from likely every Ropes office worked on the matter.

"When the pardon was granted, the heads of the pro bono committee sent out an all-personnel message ... celebrating the fact that John had really been given vindication. This was an all-firm email because that's how important the justice of John's case was to the firm," he said.