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# MOST EFFECTIVE LAWYERS 2011



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# Most Effective Lawyers 2011 Pro Bono finalist: Case shows a little time, plenty of dedication can 'save somebody's life'

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**Howard Talenfeld and Colodny Fass of Talenfeld Karlinsky & Abate**

In late 2008, South Florida attorney and child advocate Howard Talenfeld took a disturbing call from a Legal Aid Society of New York attorney. The attorney said he needed a Florida lawyer willing to help out on a case involving a former New York City foster child who was swindled by his adoptive parents out of \$400,000.



**Howard Talenfeld**

The money represented the life insurance left him by his birth mother, who was fatally stabbed by his father. The money was given to Markus Kim, now 25, after his 18th birthday. It was the only money he had in the world and he was now destitute, the

lawyer said.

In 2000, after the murder of his mother, Kim, then 14, was placed in foster care with a New York couple, Radhames and Asia Oropeza. He believes they learned of the windfall he'd receive at the age of 18 and adopted him that year. Then they convinced him to let them help him manage his money, Talenfeld was told.

Next thing Kim knew, the money was gone. The couple left Kim and moved to Polk County, Florida, where they bought several properties.

Kim contacted Legal Aid in New York, but a Florida lawyer was needed to pursue the couple. Talenfeld unsuccessfully tried to find a pro bono lawyer in Polk County, so he called the U.S. attorney's office in the Middle District of Florida and persuaded federal prosecutors there to file criminal charges against the duo, forwarding bank account statements and other financial information. Talenfeld urged the prosecutors to pursue criminal rather than civil charges, which would have taken far longer to resolve.

After a three-year investigation by the FBI and Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Radhames Oropeza was found guilty of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and sentenced to three years in federal prison. Asia Oropeza pleaded guilty to wire fraud and is also serving a three year-sentence.

Best of all, prosecutors were able to recover all Kim's money. In July 2011, he received a check for \$409,662, which represents the stolen money plus interest.

Talenfeld, a Colodny Fass shareholder, has spent hundreds of pro bono hours helping children; representing the state of Florida in major class-action lawsuits related to the foster care system; founding Florida's Children First, an advocacy group; and pushing for passage of landmark legislation protecting children in Florida, including the Foster Children's Bill of Rights.

The Kim case, while taking just 30 hours of work, sends a powerful message to other lawyers, Talenfeld said.

"What this case shows is that lawyers can spend relatively small amounts of time and save somebody's life," he said. "You don't have to put in 200 hours, you don't have to be a child welfare expert or a seasoned expert on child dependence law to make this kind of impact. You just have to use your common sense — and be willing to help."