

New Jersey State Bar Honors Attorneys At 2010 Pro Bono Conference

From therapy dogs to an affordable housing organization, John G. Webb III has provided free legal advice to charities and nonprofit organizations that wouldn't have been able to afford a lawyer.

Patent attorney John Todaro was a key organizer of a clinic at Volunteer Lawyers for Justice, which has helped nearly three dozen people navigate the complicated legal maze of bankruptcy.

Mr. Todaro and Mr. Webb are this year's winners of the New Jersey State Bar Association's highest award recognizing attorneys who volunteer their time, the Pro Bono Award. They join an impressive list of people and companies the association's Pro Bono Committee has honored each year since 2003 for their service in the legal community.

The awards were presented at the association's Third Annual Pro Bono Conference. It was held at the New Jersey Law Center in New Brunswick.

"This is a real opportunity to recognize those who so generously donate their time by providing pro bono legal services in our community. Now more than ever, there is a tremendous need for free legal assistance, and this year's award recipients are a tremendous example of what can be accomplished through volunteerism and good will," said Karen Sacks, a co-vice chair of the association's committee.

Maurice McLaughlin, chair of the committee added, "All lawyers, regardless of where they practice, can make a difference, and we want to encourage and recognize them."

A go-to volunteer, Mr. Webb, of Budd Lake's JGW, Incounsel, began working with Pro Bono Partnership four years ago. The group helps connect nonprofits and charities that need transactional legal work with lawyers willing to do it for free.

Since then the former general counsel of J. M. Huber Corp. in Edison has become a go-to volunteer on a spectrum of corporate and transaction issues from corporate name changes to reviewing bylaws to real estate rental agreements

to mergers, said Nancy Eberhardt, director of the partnership program. Mr. Webb has handled 13 pro bono cases, including six since last May.

For Therapy Dogs International, a group that arranges for dogs and their handlers to visit institutions and facilities, Mr. Webb helped it create a corporate structure to work with affiliate chapters around the country. "Mr. Webb's dedication to the group's mission and his legal advice made a tremendous difference," said Ursula Kempe, its chief executive officer. "John's expertise in dealing with complex corporate issues has prepared our nonprofit to move forward with programmatic improvements, which resulted in a stronger organization," said Kempe.

Mr. Webb also created a series of informational and organizational documents for Middle Earth, which provides intervention and assistance to at-risk kids. He "took the time to understand and then create a document easily understood and easy to communicate," said Dan Puntillo, the group's executive director.

To Webb, volunteering is just something that is part of being a lawyer. He said winning the award was humbling, adding he hopes it will remind other lawyers that everyone can contribute. "One of the reasons I am a lawyer is to help other people. From the beginning of my practice I have tried to find opportunities where I could help people who are less fortunate.... My belief and observation is that service to the public is just a part of the professional responsibility we all have," said Webb.

In these tough economic times, legal services from volunteer attorneys is even more critical to nonprofits that are struggling to maintain their endowments or facing funding cuts in the face of an increased demand for services from a hard-hit population. "Virtually every decision these agencies might undertake to reduce costs while preserving services has important legal implications and requires expert legal advice

to avoid pitfalls that may further weaken the organization," Ms. Eberhardt said. "Lawyers like John give these agencies the legal advice they badly need, helping them strengthen their programs and preserve the social safety net at a time when our citizens need it most."

Mr. Todaro first got involved with the Newark-based Volunteer Lawyers for Justice in 2005, when he took part in a seminar on special education issues and agreed to handle a case.

A year later Mr. Todaro, managing counsel in Merck & Co.'s intellectual property group, took on a bankruptcy matter in an effort to help the tide of people who sought assistance following changes to the bankruptcy law in 2005, which made it more complicated to get help through the courts. "Pro bono consumer bankruptcy work provides a window onto the difficult economic circumstances encountered by the less fortunate in society. This is something I rarely see in my corporate practice," said Todaro.

For the next few years, he continued to handle a few bankruptcy matters, but quickly realized a larger effort was

needed. He mobilized a group of his co-workers, and in July 2009 held a clinic where poor residents could get free assistance with the preparation and filing of Chapter 7 bankruptcy petitions.

Since that initial event, a troop of Merck attorneys and professionals has staffed a regular clinic that has led 10 people through the bankruptcy process.

Todaro is a "tireless and continuous" volunteer, said Jordyn Baumgarten, a director of pro bono services for the Volunteer Lawyers for Justice. "By helping these individuals begin a new financial future, the VLJ/Merck bankruptcy clinic, which was largely born out of John's commitment to serving those underserved, has helped stabilize not just individuals, but their families and the community as a whole."

To the Merck attorney, the recognition by his peers is humbling and inspiring. "Pro bono legal work gives me a chance to use my legal skills and experience to help ... (It) has exposed me to people and legal issues that I will remember years from now. It is also fulfilling to work with lawyers and staff working for the various legal aid groups and organizations in New Jersey," he said.

Partners Notes

Annamarie Simeone Named Co-COO Of NJWLA

Annamarie Simeone, a Member of Norris McLaughlin & Marcus, P.A., has been named Co-Chief Operating Officer of the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association. She previously served on the NJWLA Board of Directors as Co-Director of the Women's Leadership Resources Committee.

The New Jersey Women Lawyers Association (NJWLA) is an independent association of New Jersey women lawyers. Its mission is to retain women in the legal profession through education and activism, to promote members to the highest levels of law firm, government, academic, community and corporate positions, and to endorse qualified female attorneys for appointments to the state and federal judiciary.

Ms. Simeone concentrates her practice on labor and employment litigation. She has a wide range of experience in

both state and federal courts and agencies, primarily defending management in claims made under state and federal employment laws, including claims for sexual harassment, race, gender, national origin, and disability discrimination. Her work includes the defense of corporate defendants, as well as individual officers, directors and employees, addressing issues unique to small businesses, as well as challenges faced by large public companies.

Ms. Simeone also speaks and publishes in the area of labor and employment law. Most recently, she authored a NMM L&E Law Alert entitled "Companies Face Potential Risk for Discriminatory Refusal to Do Business" and presented "Updates on Technology, Discrimination, & Military Family Leave" at the firm's annual Hot Topics in Labor & Employment Law client seminar.

Partners Notes

Pro Bono Partnership Of Atlanta Selects DataCert Passport™

DataCert, Inc. announced that Passport, its new patent-pending technology platform for legal departments, has been selected by Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta (PBP-ATL) to connect its network of 1500-plus attorneys who provide pro bono legal services to nonprofit agencies across Atlanta. PBP-ATL will implement the Passport platform as well as DataCert's matter management application, with the goal of greatly improving process efficiency.

PBP-ATL is a nonprofit organization that was founded and is run by a consortium of legal executives and attorneys from several Atlanta-based companies. Passport was selected by PBP-ATL's staff and its board of directors, which includes legal executives and attorneys from Federal Home Loan Bank of Atlanta, GE Energy, Cox Communications, Inc., The Coca-Cola Company,

UPS, Southern Company Services, Inc., Turner Broadcasting System, Inc., AT&T, Delta Airlines, McKesson Provider Technologies, and AGL Resources.

"In trying to find a solution to meet our unique needs, we reviewed several different systems available in the market," stated Rachel Epps Spears, executive director, Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta.

"The ultimate goal of this project is to make the task of administering our matters and tracking and reporting status and metrics much more streamlined and efficient," said Reginald O'Shields, board chair, PBP-ATL and deputy general counsel, Federal Home Loan Bank of Atlanta. "This will enable us to focus less on administration and more on helping clients, potentially even allowing us to help more clients than we can today."

CASE IN POINT

by Tom Fishburne

