

Scene & Heard - HELPING OUT: Legal Aid honors lawyers for pro-bono work

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In an inaugural awards reception Thursday afternoon at Liberty Plaza, the **Winston-Salem office of Legal Aid of North Carolina** honored 46 lawyers who had done pro-bono work in 2007.

About 75 people gathered to show appreciation to private lawyers who donate their time to the organization that works with clients who can't afford legal counsel. Some folks stopped by to offer their congratulations but couldn't stay. I spotted Tom Keith, Forsyth County's district attorney, and Camille Banks-Payne, still in her black robes after being sworn in at 4 p.m. as a new District Court judge.

Banks-Payne said she is "thankful and grateful" for the work of those lawyers and called them "passionate and zealous" about their cases. "You can't tell the difference between them and the ones on salary," she said. Joining her at the reception were her husband, Eric Payne, and their son, Alex, 21 months old.



Denise Gold is one of the lawyers who were honored for helping Legal Aid.
(Ed Brown Photo)

Lawyer Denise Gold said she has benefited from volunteering her time since she was a law student at Wake Forest University. In private practice now, she continues to help, especially in the areas of domestic violence. "I've always believed that for those who have been given much, much is expected," she said. "Sometimes people just need a break."

Charlie Hall has worked as a Legal Aid staff lawyer for about a year. He expressed his appreciation for the help local lawyers give with his office's heavy caseload. Only one in eight or nine cases that apply for assistance are accepted, he said. Pro-bono lawyers not only help with the number of people who need representation but contribute specialized skills, Hall said. "That's a great value," he said.

Mingling came to an end promptly at 6 p.m., when Yvette Stackhouse, a Legal Aid managing lawyer, asked us to take a seat. In her welcome, she said of the lawyers to be honored, "We're so appreciative of their services and those who are here to honor them."

Stackhouse greeted Judge Chester Davis, Judge George Bedsworth, Magistrate Deborah Glass and Register of Deeds Karen Gordon. Gordon noted how well her former office "had cleaned up." The register of deeds office moved to the Government Center from Liberty Plaza several months ago.

The Legal Aid staff stood to be recognized and then Stackhouse introduced George Hausen, the executive director of Legal Aid, Hazel Mack-Hilliard, the Legal Aid regional manager, Celeste Harris, the chairwoman of the local advisory council, and Cal Adams, a member of the Legal Aid board of directors.

She described special guest Janet Ward-Black, the president of the N.C. Bar Association, as a "ball of fire," a quality she illustrated with a long list of impressive professional credentials and the title of Miss North Carolina in 1980. The first words out of Ward-Black's mouth were, "Sounds like she's been talking to my mother," followed by a reference to her grandmother's advice for speaking, "Have a good beginning, a good ending and keep them close together."

"That's what I'm going to do," Ward-Black said. She asked the lawyers to stand and then greeted them with, "Good evening, your excellencies." She defined "excellencies" as "ambassadors" and explained that pro-bono lawyers serve that role in the world.

"You are the focus of what the Bar is," she said. "You are the role models of what we want people to be."

Ward-Black delivered on her promise to keep her speech short and ended with the story of Abraham Lincoln writing a letter for a dying Civil War soldier. As she urged the group to offer their own helping hand, I doubt there was a dry eye in the crowd.

"She does our profession proud," Stackhouse said.

The first award was then presented by Valene Franco, a Legal Aid managing lawyer, who recognized Richard Crouse with an award for handling the most domestic-violence cases. Crouse was not present, but Franco told the story of his offer to take any case that needed work. "Fortunately for us, we took him up on his offer," she said, joking that Crouse probably missed the reception because he was helping a client.

Liza Baron, a Legal Aid managing lawyer, passed her 6-month-old daughter, Carmen Trescott, to a friend so she could present an award to Reginald Combs for handling the most housing/consumer cases.

Alicia Edwards, a Legal Aid staff lawyer, presented Kilpatrick Stockton LLP, the firm-of-the-year award. Richard Gottlieb, the president of the Forsyth County Bar Association, accepted the award for the firm.

Stackhouse gave Katherine Boskin the volunteer attorney-of-the-year award for handling the most different kinds of cases and for donating more than 100 hours of service. "We have great appreciation for her, her service and her willingness to serve," Stackhouse said as she showed the commemorative plaque that will hang in the Legal Aid offices. On the plaque, the first brass plate honoring a pro-bono lawyer is engraved with Boskin's name.

Present to receive awards for accepting cases in 2007 were Bertram Brown, Mary Craven, Bryan Gates, Deborah Glass, Denise Gold, Louise Harris, Greg Higgins, Steve McCloskey, Lorraine Mortis, Donald Pocock and Susan Ryan.

Hazel Mack-Hilliard thanked the lawyers in advance for future work with clients who need help in mortgage-foreclosure cases. "Our clients need you, and we thank you," she said.

Cal Adams thanked Tripp Greeson, pro-bono director at Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, and called the work of all the pro-bono lawyers an "integral part" of the work of Legal Aid. He described the work of the Legal Aid staff lawyers as a "thankless task" and said he admired "the people who make this tremendous sacrifice. They're the real heroes." Adams also accepted an award for accepting cases in 2007.

In his closing remarks, George Hausen honored the lawyers present with the words, "You have a tremendous impact on your clients, their households and their neighborhoods." He called the Legal Aid staff the "best and brightest" and told the pro-bono lawyers who help them, "You should be proud you are part of this." He referred to the group as "community activists in the best sense of the word."

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