

Del. Legal Community Members Honored For Pro Bono Work

By **Rose Krebs**

Law360 (October 26, 2023, 12:51 PM EDT) -- The Delaware State Bar Association is once again recognizing pro bono work done by those in the state's legal community with its annual Christopher W. White Access to Justice Awards.

This year's honorees told Law360 Pulse this week that while recognition is appreciated, the real reward comes from helping those in need get access to legal services.

"None of us have made it through life without help, myself included," Cliff C. Gardner, a partner in Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom LLP's Wilmington office, told Law360 Pulse on Wednesday. "It's fundamental to my belief structure that I help others."

Gardner was honored with this year Christopher W. White Achievement Award, which is given "to a member of the bar who has shown an exemplary recent contribution to pro bono services (generally in the past one to three years) and stands as a role model to other attorneys," according to the DSBA.

His firm was honored with the Leadership Award, handed out to "a legal organization (legal department or law office) that has demonstrated outstanding leadership in the field of pro bono service to Delaware's indigent population," a DSBA document says.

The DSBA hands out multiple Christopher W. White Access to Justice Awards annually to recognize pro bono work. They were named in memory of White, a lawyer who had worked for the Delaware Community Legal Aid Society, another of the state's main legal aid organizations.

This year's recipients were recognized at a breakfast in Wilmington on Thursday, but the honorees were announced beforehand.

Faiz Ahmad, who leads Skadden's Wilmington office, told Law360 Pulse by email on Tuesday that his firm is "honored to receive the Leadership Award for our long-standing commitment to pro bono work and more specifically our work assisting victims of domestic violence."

"Over the last five years, Skadden's Delaware office has dedicated more than 2,000 hours to support individuals seeking Protection from Abuse orders, in partnership with Delaware Volunteer Legal Services," Ahmad said. "These filings are crucial in helping ensure the safety of those experiencing physical or emotional harm. While the process can be difficult and overwhelming for a person suffering abuse, having the support of an attorney can make it less daunting."

Ahmad said "pro bono work is an integral part of our office and firm culture and our commitment to our community" and that Skadden looks "forward to continuing to build on our efforts to assist those in our community who are most in need."

Gardner leads pro bono efforts for Skadden's 62-attorney Wilmington office and has personally "represented numerous victims of discrimination and abuse," his profile on the firm's website says.

He told Law360 Pulse he typically carries one or two pro bono matters at any given time and usually gets the work through referrals from local or national legal assistance organizations.

It's work he finds rewarding and important, Gardner told Law360 Pulse.

"I became a lawyer to help people," he said. "We make our communities better when we help each other."

His pro bono work has included high-profile cases, such as representing a nonprofit organization and group of Muslim families who sued the city of Wilmington after children in a summer camp program were denied access in 2018 to pool facilities because of their dress, according to court documents.

The case was settled in Delaware federal court in 2019, when the city agreed to various terms, including revising regulations to "expressly accommodate clothing worn for religious reasons," an announcement at the time said.

Gardner and other Skadden attorneys have also done pro bono work on behalf of Texas death row inmate Rodney Reed, who continues to profess his innocence after being convicted of murder in 1998. In an April ruling in his case, the U.S. Supreme Court found that state prisoners requesting post-conviction DNA testing have until after all state appeals finish before a clock for federal relief starts ticking.

Other pro bono work done by Skadden's Delaware attorneys includes landlord-tenant matters and an annual expungement clinic to help people clear juvenile convictions from their record, Gardner said.

Ross Aronstam & Moritz LLP paralegal Stephanie McConaghy, recipient of this year's Legal Professional Pro Bono Service Award award, told Law360 on Wednesday that accolades are not what she seeks by doing pro bono work, but "it's nice to be told, hey, you're doing a good job."

She received the award given to a person "employed or retained by a lawyer, law office, corporation, governmental agency or other entity, who performs pro bono legal work in the pursuit of Access to Justice," according to the DSBA.

McConaghy has been a board member of the Delaware Paralegal Association since 2012, including having served as its president and vice president, she told Law360 Pulse. She is currently treasurer.

She works pro bono with the Innocence Project Delaware, which aims to assist wrongfully convicted people in the state, assisting with Delaware's high school mock trial competition, and helping senior citizens prepare their wills.

She credited her firm for supporting her pro bono work and its employees for being generous in helping

with initiatives she's been involved with over the years.

R. Brandon Jones of Delaware firm Hudson Jones Jaywork & Fisher LLC received this year's Commitment Award, which the DSBA says is given to a bar member "who has demonstrated a sterling commitment to pro bono work throughout his or her career by dedicating time and energy to the support and provision of legal services."

Jones told Law360 Pulse on Wednesday that much of his pro bono work during the past decade or so is focused on wills, estate planning, and power of attorney matters in Kent County, and that his clients are referred to him through a Delaware legal aid organization.

Jones said that in his more than 50 years of practicing law, his pro bono clients "are the nicest people" he's ever dealt with, and they have shown so much gratitude. "It was a joy to work with them," he added.

Angela Priest Flaherty, senior counsel in Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati PC's Wilmington office, told Law360 Pulse by email on Tuesday that she was honored to be recognized with the Service to Children Award.

That award is given to a lawyer, legal professional, or organization that shows "outstanding commitment to, and work for, children in the provision of legal or community services," according to the DSBA.

"My favorite part about being a lawyer is getting to know and represent kids in Delaware's foster system, and I've been fortunate to serve as a guardian ad litem for 16 children over the past 7 years," she said. "It almost seems wrong to receive an award for doing something that has made my own life so much richer. I'm so thankful that I've been able to learn about each of these children and be part of their lives during a traumatic time. Every child I've been blessed to work with has a huge heart and deserves a healthy and happy future."

--Additional reporting by Cara Salvatore. Editing by Nicole Bleier.