

Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project Honors 2017 Champions for Justice

Gayle T. Murphy, Pro Bono Manager, Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project, Inc.

ECBA Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP) and The Center for Elder Law and Justice (CELJ) honored their dedicated volunteers, community members and law firm supporters at an Awards Reception immediately preceding the 10th Annual Champions for Justice Bash on Friday, November 17 at the Hotel@ Lafayette in Buffalo, NY.

This year, the **Hon. Gerald J. Whalen**, Presiding Justice of the Appellate Division Fourth Judicial Department,



Melinda Disare is addressing the awards ceremony audience.

kicked off the Awards Reception, expressing his gratitude for the significant commitment of all the award winners toward achieving the ideal of justice for all. BAEC President **Melinda G. Disare** closed the Awards Reception by delivering inspirational remarks about liberty and justice for all.

The 2017 VLP award winners include:

Champion for Justice Award

KATHERINE S. BIFARO, Executive Director of the Bar Association of Erie County (BAEC), was honored with the Champion for Justice Award, the highest award given jointly from CELJ and VLP. **Ms. Bifaro**, who is retiring from the BAEC at the end of 2017, has been a tireless supporter of legal services organizations and initiatives throughout her career at the BAEC. She has spent a lifetime serving the Bar and our organizations. **Ms. Bifaro's** efforts have been instrumental in enabling



This group photo combines all the award winners from both VLP and the CELJ.



Robert Elardo, Melinda Disare (president of BAEC), Katherine Bifaro (executive director BAEC), and Hon. Gerald Whalen, Presiding Justice Appellate Division Fourth Department

us to provide increased free civil legal services for our clients.

Attorney of the Morning (Eviction Defense) Award:

MICHAEL C. CIMASI, Esq., maintains a busy law practice but has committed time to volunteer at our AOM program. Since February 2014, shortly after his Bar admission, **Mr. Cimasi** volunteered over 111 hours representing 194 clients. This year he volunteered over 46 hours at AOM, representing 80 clients. A dependable and dynamic volunteer, **Mr. Cimasi** is patient, kind, and skilled at fully explaining the legal process to clients facing homelessness. We could not ask for a more devoted volunteer than **Michael C. Cimasi, Esq.**

Divorce Award:

KEITH B. SCHULEFAND, Esq., a valued volunteer who has been representing VLP divorce clients for over a decade. Since 2006, **Mr. Schulefand** has donated an incredible 235 hours handling 19 divorce cases. He approaches each divorce case with the same dedication and skill that he is known for in his private practice. He routinely handles more than one VLP divorce case at a time, and generously handles more complicated matters that are difficult to place. **Mr. Schulefand's** commitment to VLP over the years is nothing short of remarkable. We are pleased to honor **Keith B. Schulefand, Esq.** for his longstanding commitment to VLP and our divorce program.

Immigration Awards:

WILLIAM ALTREUTER, Esq. is a practicing litigation attorney and a professor at Buffalo State College. **Mr. Altreuter** called us wanting to help when he learned that one of his college students, a Lawful Permanent Resident, had been detained at the Buffalo Federal Detention Facility in Batavia, NY. Days before college graduation, our client was released from ICE custody. **Mr. Altreuter** skillfully represented his student in the challenging removal proceeding and won LPR Cancellation of Removal. VLP and our client are truly grateful for

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the significant and important involvement by **William Altreuter, Esq.**

The law firm of **DREW & DREW** has been an asset to VLP's Immigration Program for the past 5 years. As a small, three attorney firm, they successfully handled 5 complicated citizenship cases, including one case involving a long term permanent resident client faced with cancellation for a minor crime. **Dean M. Drew, Esq.**, is currently representing a survivor of female genital mutilation seeking asylum in a complex case. Although **Alana Carr, Esq.**, **Dean A. Drew, Esq.**, and **Dean M. Drew, Esq.**, are not Immigration attorneys, they are always more than willing to take on another case, or to learn a new area of law. We thank the attorneys at **Drew & Drew** for their commitment to our Immigration Program.

MATTHEW L. KOLKEN, Esq., with the law firm of **Kolken and Kolken**, is one of the most experienced Immigration litigators in Buffalo. After hearing about young children fleeing brutal gang-plagued violence from Central American countries, **Mr. Kolken** came to VLP offering to help. Since then, he has taken on a significant numbers of Unaccompanied Immigrant Minors cases, usually handling multiple cases at a time. **Mr. Kolken's** exemplary work representing these traumatized children is especially important because we do not know what these children would do to represent themselves in such a complicated area of law. **Mr. Kolken** also presents at VLP's CLE programs and harnesses the power of social media to recruit his colleagues to join him in providing essential pro bono legal assistance to these children. We are so pleased to honor **Matthew L. Kolken**.

Income Tax Controversy Award:

E. GREENARD POLES, the director of the Buffalo Federation of Neighborhood Centers (BFNC) tax program, has spent decades helping

our Buffalo community. His work exemplifies pro bono advocacy for the working poor. Each year nearly 8000 low income people receive invaluable, free tax preparation at the BFNC thanks to **Mr. Poles** and his staff. **Mr. Poles** works closely with VLP's Derek Wheeler and Greg Stewart, regularly providing referrals to our Low Income Tax Clinic (LITC) and directly assisting VLP clients with complex tax preparation to help resolve their tax controversies. **E. Greenard Poles** is a Champion for Justice.

Community Partner Award

ROBERT C. BRUCATO, Esq. is well known to Buffalo's legal community, having managed the Buffalo office of Counsel Press since its opening in 1992. **Mr. Brucato** is involved with multiple legal organizations and associations in Western New York, and is a frequent presenter at CLE programs. He goes above and beyond when he is asked to co-sponsor VLP events. His commitment to young attorneys is impressive. We are grateful for his generous support of all our initiatives, including our Champions for Justice Bash. We are pleased to honor **Robert C. Brucato, Esq.**

Federal Court Award:

HURWITZ & FINE, P.C., attorneys have supported the Pro Se Assistance Program (PSAP), our walk in legal clinic at the WDNY Courthouse, since it launched in February 2014. Attorneys **Earl Cantwell, Mike Perley, and Paul Suozzi** have provided important limited scope legal assistance to 41 pro se litigants over the past three years. In addition to helping our clients make sense of the often complex Federal Court procedures, the **Hurwitz & Fine** attorneys are generous mentors for law student volunteers. They go above and beyond to assist the PSAP and are most deserving of this recognition.

Family Court Help Desk Award:

KEVIN C. CONDON, Esq., a solo

practitioner, began volunteering for VLP in 2006, representing our bankruptcy and divorce clients. In 2014 he joined VLP's Family Court Help Desk pro bono attorneys. Since 2006, **Mr. Condon** has volunteered a total of 146 hours assisting 195 clients. This year alone, **Mr. Condon's** Family Court Help Desk work has been extraordinary, volunteering 58 hours on 24 days to assist 122 clients. His breadth of experience in Family Court combined with his thorough and straightforward manner is invaluable. **Kevin C. Condon, Esq.**, is truly an extraordinary pro bono attorney.

Law Firm Pro Bono Coordinator Award

ROBERT P. HEARY, Esq. is a longstanding supporter of pro bono initiatives in the Buffalo office of **Barclay Damon, LLP**. Much of the credit for our ability to call upon **Barclay Damon** attorneys to represent our clients is attributed to **Robert Heary**. **Mr. Heary** practices what he preaches, volunteering at the PSAP and Say Yes Legal Clinics regularly. He is also a VLP Board member who volunteers an untold number of hours advising VLP on management and personnel issues without ever seeking recognition. In the past year under **Robert Heary's** leadership, 35 attorneys in the Buffalo office of **Barclay Damon, LLP** volunteered over 341 hours representing 178 clients. Thank you **Robert P. Heary, Esq.**, for your dedication to VLP's mission.

Law Firm Commitment Award

KENNEY SHELTON LIPTAK NOWAK LLP attorneys have supported VLP for over 30 years, with **Patrick Kenney** handling a VLP tort defense case as far back as 1989. **Shari Jo Reich**, readily accepts VLP clients with challenging issues, and **Jessica Reich Lynch** handles a number of our divorce clients. Recently, the firm implemented a firm-wide pro bono initiative to increase their pro

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bono involvement in our community, thanks to the impressive efforts of associates **Henry Zomerfeld** and **Ashlyn Capote**. The firm now has a strong, consistent presence at AOM, and handles divorces and family law matters, tort defense cases, NFP clients, and wills and estates matters. Last year the firm's attorneys volunteered over 173 hours representing 80 clients. We are grateful for the pro bono innovation and leadership at **Kenney Shelton Liptak Nowak LLP**.

VLP "V.I.P." Award

JOSHUA DUBS, Esq. is the perfect example of how a single attorney can make a huge difference in the lives of our clients. Since 2009, when **Mr. Dubs** came to VLP as a newly admitted attorney, he has volunteered over 376 hours representing 462 clients in cases involving landlord/tenant issues, wills, power of attorney, name change, guardianship, custody and visitation, and divorce. This year he spent over 64 hours representing 100 clients. He always has an open case or two or three. His commitment to the AOM program remains solid, both as a court volunteer and an instructor for our CLE programs. He says the work he does in his private practice pays the bills, but his volunteer work with VLP "feeds the soul". Thank you **Joshua E. Dubs, Esq.**, for being a continuing Champion for Justice.

Judicial Award

JOSEPH V. DEREN, Esq., and **JONATHAN G. GORMAN, Esq.**, Court Attorneys with Buffalo City Court, have had an enormous positive impact on our eviction defense work three days every week at the Attorney of the Morning (AOM) program. Both **Mr. Deren** and **Mr. Gorman** play an important role with the fair and efficient operation of the eviction court, providing access to justice for our clients. This year **Mr. Deren** worked with VLP to review court procedures and forms to improve case handling. In addition, **Mr. Gorman** was a lecturer at a VLP eviction defense CLE. Both **Joseph V. Deren, Esq.** and **Jonathan G. Gorman, Esq.** extend the highest degree of professionalism to our clients, staff and volunteers. They are Champions for Justice.