

This month's *In the Public Interest* column highlights some of the outstanding contributions of VLP's dedicated pro bono attorneys and staff. Through the generosity of our volunteer attorneys, equal access to justice is one step closer to reality for our vulnerable low-income clients.

Lisa Coppola was one of two attorneys statewide to receive the prestigious **NYSBA Empire State Counsel Outstanding Pro Bono Volunteer** award at the 14th annual Justice for All Luncheon at the NYSBA Annual Meeting in NYC on January 29, 2015. Lisa was recognized for her extraordinary work on her first VLP case. Lisa and her colleague, **Ryan Lema**, worked over 250 hours to win their client's asylum case. In addition to litigating on behalf of her clients, an Eritrean family with three young children, Lisa coordinated assistance efforts for her clients after their apartment burned down five days before their hearing. Even after the case was closed, Lisa continued to assist by donating her time and experience to train other volunteer attorneys interested in VLP Immigration cases. According to Lisa, working on this case was a highlight of her career. "It all comes back to meaningful work and the opportunity to live one's integrity by advocating for deserving people with nothing but courage, fortitude and gentle tenacity."

The Empire State Counsel Program salutes NYSBA attorney members who have provided 50 hours or more of free legal assistance to persons of limited financial means. **Lisa Coppola**, **Joshua Dubs**, **Jessica Reich**, and **Michael Sciortino** donated 50 or more hours of pro bono legal services through VLP in 2014 and received the prestigious Empire State Counsel designation.

It was wonderful to see our local pro bono attorneys well represented in the Empire State Counsel Program Photo Gallery, prominently displayed at the recent NYSBA Annual Meeting: **Patrick Sheldon** (134.5 hours); **Ryan Lema** (187.1 hours); **Spencer Durland** (612.7 hours); **Joshua Dubs** (64.63 hours); **Lisa Coppola** (140 hours); **Eric Glynn** (55 hours); **Karim Abdulla** (73.7 hours); and **Corey Auerbach** (98.6 hours).

Attorneys have many reasons for engaging in pro bono legal services. It was great to learn more about the importance of volunteering from three of our local attorneys featured in the Empire State Counsel Program Photo Gallery:

Eric Glynn stated that, "we all chose to become lawyers because we want to help people. Pro bono work provides the opportunity to do that in the purest sense, to help those who truly need it, while using and developing our legal knowledge and talent. I cannot think of a single reason not to do it."

Karim Abdulla does pro bono because, "It's a great opportunity to give back to the community and do good for others who might not ordinarily be able to afford representation."

For **Corey Auerbach**, "Pro bono is my way to 'pay it forward' for all those who have helped me in times of need." You can read more about the 2014 Empire State Counsel honorees at www.nysba.org/ESCarchive/.

VLP volunteer attorneys who generously donated 50 hours or more of their time and expertise to our clients in 2014 are: **Corey Auerbach, Jennifer Blackhall, Lisa Coppola, Joshua Dubs, Peter Gathings, Timothy Hennessy, Matthew Herdzik, Jr., John Kolaga, Ryan Lema, Michael Mettillie, Jennifer Metzger-Kimura, Ashlea Palladino, Sallie Randolph, Jessica Reich Lynch, Michael Anton Sciortino, Amber Storrr, Christopher Szczygiel, John Trigilio, and Brandon Wrazen.** Thank you for your dedication and commitment to VLP.

Jessica Lazarin, VLP's Immigration Staff Attorney, received the Cornell Law School Alumni Exemplary Public Service Rising Star Award at the Cornell Law School's Presentation Ceremony in NYC on January 30, 2015. The awards ceremony program highlighted Jessica's impressive service as follows:

"As an Immigration Staff Attorney with the Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP), Jessica's practice includes representation before the U.S. Immigration Court and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service. She provides weekly legal orientation program and pro se workshops in English and in Spanish for individuals detained at the Buffalo Federal Detention Facility in Batavia, N.Y and mentors local attorneys who take on immigration cases on behalf of VLP. Jessica also handles special immigrant juvenile cases involving youth in foster care and represents eligible detained individuals pursuant to a grant from the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project. Before joining VLP in 2008, Jessica practiced civil litigation with a large Buffalo firm. Jessica is a member of the Minority Bar Association of Western New York, Inc.'s Diversity Task force and sits on the Board of Directors for the Belle Center, a not-for-profit offering innovative educational, social, and community building services for children, youth, senior citizens and families living in Western New York. She earned a B.A. from the University of Texas at El Paso in 2000 and her J.D. in 2006 from Cornell Law School."

Congratulations Jessica.

Brian Welsh will receive the Rev. A. Joseph Bissonette Pro Bono Award at the BAEC Law Day Luncheon on April 29, 2015. Brian is a perfect example of extraordinary commitment to providing pro bono legal services to those in need. Since 1991, Brian has donated 875 pro bono hours and closed 49 cases for VLP. He generously takes on many of VLP's more difficult cases and has a reputation for treating all of his VLP clients with the utmost respect and compassion. In addition to being one of VLP's outstanding pro bono attorneys, Brian also serves on the VLP Board of Directors.

Natalie Stutz, VLP's Family Court Staff Attorney, will receive the Justice Award at the BAEC Law Day Luncheon on April 29, 2015. In addition to her case work at VLP, Natalie supervises VLP's Family Court Help Desk at Erie County Family Court. Along with **Natalie Stutz** and the Family Court Help Desk, **Bernadette Gargano**, the Federal Court Pro Se Assistance

Program and the UB Law Pro Se Civil Litigation Support Practicum will share the Justice Award. As stated in one of the many nomination forms, *“these two pro se help desks and the coordinated effort of those partners who make these desks possible is a tribute to Western New York’s unique ability to draw from our collegial bar, the will and skill to do great things. Helping those in need to navigate an intimidating and complex justice system is the surest way to improve the communities’ faith in a system and assure access to justice.”* Congratulations to **Natalie Stutz** and her team!

Kimberly Boulden, a VLP paralegal and Say Yes Buffalo legal clinic coordinator, received the Changemakers 30 Under 30 Award in the Education category. Kimberly was recognized for excelling in her career and for having a positive impact in that field. Congratulations Kimberly.

We would like to acknowledge **Kristin Arcuri, Emilio Colaiacovo, Catherine Nagel, and Shari Jo Reich’s** generous contributions to VLP. This group of valued VLP supporters collaborated to develop and present a day-long *Divorce 101* CLE in December 2014. While many may have been deterred by the nasty weather on the day of the CLE, these four highly regarded matrimonial attorneys presented a memorable program. We were treated to guest appearances and words of wisdom from **Judge Sharon Townsend, Judge Dennis Ward, and Judge Donna Siwek** and her confidential law clerk **Kate Roach**. We hope that newly admitted attorneys and attorneys who would like to expand their practice to the matrimonial field will consider attending our next Divorce CLE to benefit from the expertise and support of our veteran matrimonial pro bono attorneys.

We would also like to thank the legal community for taking the time to learn about Say Yes Buffalo, as well as the law firms who have generously adopted a Buffalo Public School for the Say Yes Legal Clinic initiative. **Hodgson Russ** adopted School 54; **Phillips Lytle** adopted South Park High School; **Lippes Mathias Wexler Friedman** adopted School 81; and **Harris Beach and Hiscock & Barclay** co-adopted East High School. In addition, **Gibson, McAskill & Crosby** will be co-adopting a school. Attorneys and paralegals from these law firms donate two hours a day to meet with clients at the walk-in legal clinics housed in these four Buffalo Public Schools. The legal clinics began on January 20, 2015, and our volunteer attorneys and law firms are doing a tremendous job providing limited-scope legal assistance to many families of Buffalo Public School students.

Finally, VLP wants to thank all of law firms, judges and lawyers that helped make the VLP 2014 Law Firm Fundraising Campaign such a huge success. The campaign raised total of \$98,694 from 166 different donors, including 19 judges.

Hodgson Russ LLP and **Phillips Lytle LLP** lead the way as VLP Benefactor Law Firms. VLP Partner Law Firms (VLP’s 2nd highest category) were: **Cellino & Barnes; Damon Morey LLP;** and **Jaeckle Fleischmann & Mugel LLP.**

Local support is crucial to VLP’s success. VLP has been more successful than ever in bringing in state and federal funding, but continued local support is needed to pay the rent and

supplement the other funding sources. Your local financial support enables VLP to continue providing comprehensive assistance to low- income clients through the work of our own staff and the hundreds of local volunteers whose work we coordinate.

As you can see, our VLP volunteers continue working tirelessly to assist our clients. Despite recognizing the great work of many of VLP's volunteer attorneys and staff in this column, the work of each and every VLP volunteer is invaluable to our clients and our community. Thank you one and all for your dedication and service to VLP.

Joshua Dubs, an award winning VLP volunteer, sums up the importance of pro bono work perfectly: "There is no higher calling for people of learned professions than doing good for those who need it most, but can afford it least. Our justice system was never deigned to be something which only the most wealthy and powerful could avail themselves. By doing pro bono legal work, I feel like I am helping further our fundamental American ideals. We, as individual lawyers, may not be able to change the world, but if we help someone who might otherwise not be able to afford our services, we can change the world for that client."