

Attorney

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Justice For All Celebration

By Teresa Warren
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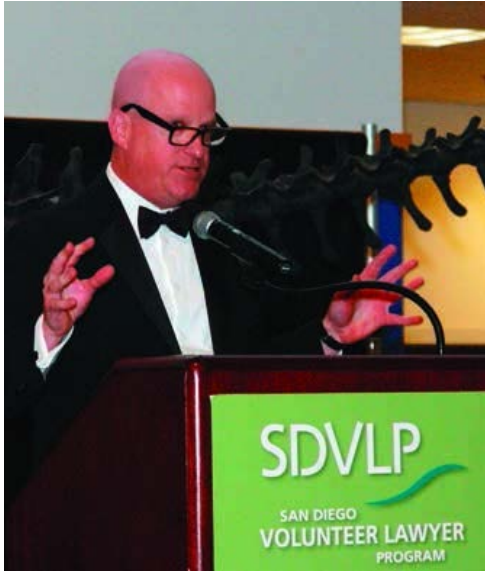


On September 19, the legal community came together to celebrate individuals and law firms who are committed to helping others by providing pro bono legal services. Sole practitioners and senior partners of large law firms joined together to also salute the San Diego Volunteer Lawyer Program for its 30 years of dedication to the underserved at the organization's annual Justice For All Celebration. This year's celebration was held at the San Diego Natural History Museum and was attended by 300 individuals.

SDVLP has a long history of providing civil legal services and today it is one of the largest providers of pro bono services locally. With a mission of providing legal assistance to the poor and vulnerable, SDVLP continues to be a much needed and utilized resource.

“When SDVLP was founded three decades ago, justice for all was an aspiration, not a reality, and that continues to be the case today,” states Amy Fitzpatrick, executive director of SDVLP. “When one single person is denied justice, we all lose.”

Each year, more than 5,000 individuals turn to SDVLP.



Long time SDVLP supporter and master of ceremonies for the Celebration (and appellate lawyer) Dan Lawton noted, “SDVLP is where people who have no other options go and receive help.”

Potential SDVLP clients must meet low income eligibility requirements and be in need of services that match those provided by SDVLP. The majority – nearly 80 percent – of SDVLP’s clients are women and children. The needs vary from family law, guardianship and domestic violence prevention/intervention to HIV/AIDs discrimination and benefits assistance, unlawful detainer counsel and special services geared toward foster children, including immigration assistance and education law.

Finding clients isn’t an issue for SDVLP – providing services to everyone who needs help and obtaining funding to grow are the organization’s biggest challenges.

That is why the Celebration is such an important event. It is an opportunity to honor those firms and individuals who give time and resources to support the ideal of justice for all in San Diego.

One such individual is Ben Wagner, an associate with Mintz Levin who was presented with the Pro Bono Publico Award at the Celebration. An IP litigator by trade, Wagner works with domestic violence victims at legal clinics run by SDVLP.

SDVLP does extensive community outreach and has been heralded for founding and organizing the annual Women’s Resource Fair for the past 25 years. At the Fair, women and children are provided with an array of more than 100 services, including legal, medical and social services. And each year since its inception, Melissa Blackburn-Joniaux has been



a Fair volunteer. For her commitment, Blackburn-Joniaux received SDVLP's Exemplary Service Award.

In addition to volunteer lawyers providing pro bono services, SDVLP has a staff of 24 committed individuals who also work directly with clients. The staff's duties range from intake to litigating complex cases. They are highly skilled professionals whose commitment to helping those in need is unsurpassed.

Many of San Diego's law firms also share this commitment and support the organization in a variety of ways. Three law firms were honored for directing cy pres funds to SDVLP – Cohelan, Khoury & Singer, Hanson Law Firm and Kirby Noonan Lance & Hoge. Each was honored with the Access to Justice Award at the event.

DLA Piper was presented with the Sustaining Justice Award for its long-term support of SDVLP. Dating back to the days that the firm was Gray Cary, it has been an advocate for SDVLP by providing both volunteers and funds. Last year alone, nine DLA Piper attorneys gave over 650 hours of pro bono time.

Special guest speaker, the Honorable Irma E. Gonzalez of the U.S. District Court, Southern District, reminded the lawyers in attendance that, given the skills and training they possess, lawyers can give back to the community in a unique way. The American Bar Association recommends that each lawyer give 50 pro bono hours a year. In San Diego County, if each lawyer gave only a small portion of that, many more of our community's underserved could be assisted.

Being an SDVLP volunteer or donor allows lawyers to make a big difference in our community by ensuring that the goal of justice for all continues.



As Master of Ceremonies Lawton summed it up, "SDVLP represents the best of what it means to be a lawyer."

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