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The Public Law Center's Annual Volunteer Recognition Dinner— A Celebration of Good Works by the Orange County Legal Community



by Kenneth W. Babcock

The night of Thursday July 10, 2003 was a very special evening. This was so not just because nearly 400 lawyers and other supporters had gathered at the Hilton Hotel in Costa Mesa for the Public Law Center's annual Volunteer Recognition Dinner. It was not just because PLC raised over \$160,000 to support the provision of free legal services to Orange County's poor and under-represented. And it was not just because several noted guests were present, including 20 members of the Orange County bench, Orange County Bar Association President Robert Gerard, emcee Senator Joe Dunn and keynote speaker California Attorney General Bill Lockyer, who was accompanied by his wife, Orange County attorney Nadia Davis Lockyer, and the couple's 20 day old son, Diego.

It was a very special evening because more people than ever before gathered to raise more money than ever before in a single night of tribute to those who can truly be called heroes in the Orange County legal community. The principal focus, of course, was on the several award winners, described below. But the night was one of celebration for all the efforts of the lawyers, paralegals and law students who have sacrificed their time and effort to provide access to justice

to those who cannot afford a lawyer. Whether they were leaders of the legal community from the most preeminent firms in the county, whether they were small firm or sole practitioners or whether they were from one of the local area law schools, PLC's July 10 dinner was a night to reflect on all the good work of PLC's staff and volunteers. Of particular note were the award winners, who were. . . .

Law Firm of the Year

Howrey Simon Arnold & White, LLP was PLC's 2003 Law Firm of the Year; Greg Cordrey of the firm was on hand to accept the award. Over the course of the past two years nearly one-half the lawyers in Howrey's Irvine office have worked on pro bono cases for PLC. Firm wide in 2002, Howrey billed more than 41,000 hours on pro bono matters involving more than 230 clients. That kind of effort is graphic confirmation of the statement in the firm's 2002 Pro Bono and Public Service Report that pro bono is "an integral part of the Howrey culture."

Howrey Simon's work for PLC clients has included a variety of different matters. The firm's lawyers have handled child custody, elder financial abuse, harassment litigation, and collection defense. When we seek volunteer lawyers

out through our twice-monthly email list of new case opportunities, it's common for lawyers at Howrey to promptly contact us expressing interest.

On one case, Howrey attorneys provided assistance to an 87 year old widow who had owned her home in Fullerton since 1953. Several years ago, a loan broker convinced her to mortgage her house \$25-50,000 at a time. Within five years the house, which the client had owned free and clear before she met the broker, was fully encumbered with monthly payments too high for the client to make on her \$700 month social security check. The broker convinced the client to sell the home by promising her that the buyer would let the client rent it for the rest of her days. He failed to tell the client the buyer was his mother; a few months after the sale the rent was raised to more than the client could pay and the broker's mother evicted the client. The broker and his mother then began preparing the house for sale.

A team of Howrey lawyers stepped in and sued the defendant and his mortgage/real estate brokerage firm for a dozen counts of fraud, breach of fiduciary duty, elder abuse, and various other torts. An initial round of discovery was followed by an informal settlement meeting that did not resolve the case, so due to the client's age, the case was set for trial and given priority on the court's calendar. Howrey's lawyers soon reached an excellent settlement for the client that provided her with a new residence and sufficient funds to stay there for as long as she wants.

On another matter, Howrey represented a father who sought to modify a custody order to reflect that he had physical custody of his daughter. While preparing the court papers, the Howrey attorney learned that the child's mother had a felony warrant out for her arrest. The next day, the lawyer was in court seeking an emergency order granting the client full custody of the child. The court granted the emergency petition and gave the client full temporary custody pending a hearing on an order to show cause; the matter was later settled with the father obtaining full custody with limited, supervised visitation for the mother.

Community Partner of the Year

The Council of Orange County of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was PLC's 2003 Community Partner of the year; Scott Mather of the Society accepted the award. The Society is well known for its many well established programs, such as the Second Harvest Food Bank, the Institute for Conflict Management, Friends Outside, Toys for

Tots, and six thrift stores around the county. But it is a more recent, yet less well known endeavor, for which PLC honored the Society of St. Vincent de Paul—the Armory Shelter Program.

Each winter, Orange County's two National Guard armories—one in Santa Ana and one in Fullerton—become temporary evening homeless shelters. Every night from December through the end of March approximately 150 homeless men and women find refuge from the elements and receive a hot meal at each of the Armory homeless shelters. Two years ago, when the previous agency could no longer afford to oversee the program, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul stepped in to assist.

Getting involved to help the needy in our community through the Armory Shelter Program was entirely consistent with the Society's mission and its other work for Orange County's poor and disadvantaged. Nonetheless, taking on the responsibility of running the shelter was a risky undertaking given the amount of staff resources and coordination involved. As a result of the Society's willingness to take that risk, the Armories were able to continue to operate as homeless shelters during some particularly cold and wet winter months.

Not only do homeless individuals have a place to sleep at the Armory homeless shelter, they also receive much needed legal services. Thanks to the cooperation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, each week a team of PLC staffers and volunteer attorneys, paralegals and law students from local law schools visited each Armory homeless shelter and provided a free legal clinic for those present. Set up at folding tables in the back of the Armories' main hall, volunteers interviewed client after client until all those needing help each night had been seen. Some clients only needed brief counsel and advice while others had more serious legal problems requiring more assistance. This past winter alone, PLC provided free legal services to nearly 100 homeless individuals at these clinics.

Attorney of the Year

Matthew J. Fletcher was our Attorney of the Year. Matt is a fourth year associate at the firm of Connor, Blake & Griffin. As an associate in a busy litigation firm, one would think Matt had little time for pro bono work or any other form of community service. Yet Matt somehow manages to include a steady diet of PLC work on his plate, along with a variety of different bar activities. Over the past two years, Matt has taken on six separate pro bono mat-

ters for the Public Law Center. In his remarks at our Dinner, Matt credited Ed Connor for providing a good role model by not simply condoning Matt's pro bono work but actively encouraging it.

In one case, Matt represented a mother and her daughter in a suit brought by a schoolmate who had bullied the child for years. Repeated complaints by Matt's clients to the school about the harassment were to no avail and as a result a schoolyard brawl ensued. The plaintiff sued the school seeking \$100,000 for negligence for not doing anything about the long-lived dispute, which was ironic since it was Matt's clients, not the plaintiff, who had been pleading with the school to intervene. About a year after the suit was filed, the plaintiff added the mother and daughter to the suit counting on them being unrepresented by counsel, thus unable to defend themselves. They counted wrong. PLC placed the case with Matt, who immediately propounded discovery necessary for trial. The plaintiff quickly settled with the school district for nuisance value, and dismissed Matt's clients with prejudice.

Most recently, Matt responded to an urgent PLC request for assistance. A pro per defendant needed help as she was about to take the witness stand in a challenge to a will codicil. The client had been a secretary of the lawyer who had drafted the codicil. The former secretary sought to assert her Fifth Amendment right not to incriminate herself and not testify. At the court's request, pro bono criminal defense counsel advised the client on the Fifth Amendment issues, yet the client still needed assistance from a civil litigator when she took the stand in the will case. With only one day's notice, Matt jumped in and assisted the client. Thanks to his efforts, the case against the client was dismissed.

Matt also has been actively involved in Orange County Bar Association and California State Bar activities since being admitted to the Bar. He currently serves as Orange County's representative on the California State Bar's Young Lawyers Association Board of Directors and on the OCBA's Board of Directors. In 2002, Matt served as the Chair of the OCBA's Young Lawyers Division and, in 2001, was Chair of the Board of Directors of the Orange County Chapter of Volunteers-In-Parole, Inc.

New Attorney of the Year

PLC's New Attorney of the Year was Sandra Manzano-Straehle. Sandra began her legal career clerking for a firm in Puebla, Mexico. Shortly after becoming admitted to practice law in Mexico, Sandra came to the United States

with her husband and began studying for a masters of law degree. She obtained her LL.M. from the University of San Diego and then was admitted to the California Bar.

While waiting for her bar results, Sandra began volunteering for the Public Law Center. She came to our office several days each week and worked on a variety of different matters. As a native Spanish speaker (who is also fluent in English, French and German), Sandra began helping with PLC's large monolingual Spanish speaking clientele.

Sandra regularly staffed our community legal clinic at Corbin Community Center in Santa Ana, where clients would come to discuss their legal problems, obtain brief legal counsel and, if necessary, receive more extended legal representation. As part of those efforts, Sandra prepared several monolingual Spanish speaking clients for hearings in small claims court so that those clients would be better able to present their cases to the court. She also handled a docket of cases that ran the full gamut of PLC's work including identity theft, mechanic's lien releases, evictions, insurance coverage, collection defense, guardianships, custody, and dissolution.

In one case, Sandra represented a Spanish speaking mother who had entered into an English language contract with a company that claimed to provide college scholarship information unavailable anywhere else. Because the client could not understand the contract, her 15 year old son attempted to interpret for her as best he could. The client did not understand until later that she was signing a contract or that the information she would receive under the contract was readily available from her son's school for free. Thanks to Sandra's efforts in negotiating with the company, the client was able to rescind the contract and avoid losing her family's scarce financial resources.

You Can Help

While these stories were the stories of our award winners' experiences, many other attendees at our July 10 dinner could have told similar stories about their own PLC cases. Helping a PLC client will not only provide you practical skills and help increase access to justice, it will make you feel good about being a lawyer. To find out how to get involved call 714.541.1010 or check our web site at www.publiclawcenter.org.



Kenneth W. Babcock is the Executive Director and General Counsel of the Public Law Center.