

Circuit honors local lawyers for pro bono work

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MATTOON — This week is national “Celebrate Pro Bono Week,” and in recognition of the crucial service pro bono volunteer attorneys provide throughout the Illinois Fifth Judicial Circuit, an annual Pro Bono Celebration is being held from 5:30 - 8:30 p.m tonight in Mattoon at the Mattoon Country Club. The celebration is open to attorneys, judges, court staff and members of the press.

During the event, 45 attorneys from the circuit who have provided pro bono legal assistance during the past year will be honored for their commitment to volunteer work through the Fifth Judicial Circuit Pro Bono Committee, which according to the committee, “strives to increase equal access to justice by enhancing and expanding pro bono legal services within the Fifth Judicial Circuit.”

The Fifth Judicial Circuit includes Edgar, Clark, Coles, Cumberland and Vermilion counties.

Several of the attorneys honored include those who live and work in Edgar County and who provide pro bono services to area residents with a demonstrated need. When the event was first held in 2011, attorneys from Clark and Edgar counties were solely represented; however, the event has now grown to encompass the whole district. The event is rotated to a different county each year so the whole circuit can be represented.

Last year, the Pro Bono Week Celebration was held in Paris, and previously, local attorney Rich Kash of the Fruin & Kash law firm was presented with the annual Pro Bono Service Award. This year, the award will be given to Kevin Colombo, a partner at Saikley, Garrison, Colombo & Barney LLC in Danville.

The keynote speaker for the event will be Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice Rita B. Garman, and other speakers will include Angelica Wawrznek, the Fifth Judicial Circuit Committee chair, and Paris native Ramona Sullivan, Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation senior staff attorney and pro bono coordinator.

“In the 65 counties of southern Illinois, the only legal aid program is Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance, and the numbers are something like 9,000 eligible people for each legal aid lawyer, which is a lot more people than we could ever possibly serve. So every single thing that a pro bono attorney does for a low-income individual is something they would not have had access to otherwise, and it’s extremely helpful,” Sullivan said.

Sullivan also noted that many of the attorneys being recognized are committed to providing pro bono assistance throughout their careers, and can be counted on in the long-term for their volunteer efforts.

The event, held by the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI), is to both honor district attorneys who have provided counsel to those in need, and to promote more volunteer work to help meet the abundant need for such services in the district. PILI's mission is to promote pro bono services in Illinois by expanding the availability of legal services for people, families and communities in need.

"We really try to help those in need, who might have legal issues, and they can't afford legal representation," explained Lauren Harper, a Development & Communications Associate with PILI.