

Media Mention: Lance Martin Honored for Pro Bono Service

May 16, 2019



Recently, we wrote this article announcing that the Buncombe County Bar was recognizing creditors' rights attorney Lance Martin for providing free legal aid to low-income people across Western North Carolina.

On May 15, 2019, the Buncombe County Bar along with the Pisgah Legal Services held the 2019 Pro Bono Awards in Asheville honoring Martin and three other attorneys. Pisgah Legal Services published the following press release on Mountain Xpress regarding all of the attorneys' exemplary work. The pictures in the accompanying post are from the awards ceremony. Enjoy!



L to R: Eleanor Powers, Natalie Gray, Lance Martin, and Alex Gomes

It's a well-known fact that if you are a defendant in the criminal justice system in the United States, you are guaranteed free representation if you cannot afford an attorney. But if you are facing a civil case— an unlawful eviction, dangerous threats from an abusive spouse, or harassment from a predatory lender— then there is no guaranteed legal assistance. If you don't have funds to pay for an attorney in a civil

matter that impacts your livelihood, your family or your health, then you are on your own to navigate a complex and intimidating judicial system.

In the U.S. low- and moderate-income people facing civil legal problems must rely on nonprofit legal aid programs as the only resource for help when they face eviction or foreclosure, domestic violence, or denial of health care or other benefits, and these programs can't begin to meet the need with paid staff attorneys. This is why having volunteer attorneys, including attorneys in private practice, retired attorneys and others, willing to provide free help is essential to those who cannot afford to pay for legal help.

Local nonprofit Pisgah Legal Services provides free civil legal aid to more than 16,000 low-income people across WNC each year to solve housing problems, stop domestic violence and child abuse, secure health care and income, and address other urgent needs. But with over 200 calls a week from people in crisis, the nonprofit's 25 staff attorneys cannot begin to meet all of the needs in the community.

Pisgah Legal Services depends on volunteer attorneys to donate their time and expertise to take on legal cases for clients living in poverty. The Mountain Area Volunteer Lawyers (MAVL) Program, a partnership between the private bar and Pisgah Legal Services, utilizes more than 300 volunteer attorneys who donated 3,993 hours of pro bono service in 2018. Volunteers handled approximately 20% of all of Pisgah Legal's cases.

The Buncombe County Bar will present the following awards:

Outstanding Volunteer Lawyer Award Alex Gomes of Montford Law – A former staff attorney for Pisgah Legal Services, Alex Gomes started volunteering with the Mountain Area Volunteer Lawyer Program (MAVL) as soon as he entered private practice in 2012. Alex takes some of the most complex family law cases, representing domestic violence survivors in divorce, custody matters and equitable distribution of assets to help ensure the survivor can live apart from their abuser.

Outstanding Younger Attorney Award Natalie Gray of Westall, Gray, Connolly, PA – Natalie Gray has been a volunteer attorney with Pisgah Legal's MAVL program since 2014, providing legal help on a range of consumer issues including bankruptcy, debt management, homeownership matters, collections, and consumer protection. She facilitates regular debt management clinics at Pisgah Legal Services to educate local consumers about their rights and responsibilities. One of Natalie's recent pro bono bankruptcy clients was a woman who had suffered serious, disabling health problems. Natalie helped her secure debt relief so she could keep her home.



Outstanding Volunteer Lawyer Award Lance Martin of Ward & Smith, PA – Lance Martin has been a volunteer attorney with Pisgah Legal's MAVL Program since 2011 and regularly represents low-income tenants in landlord-tenant and consumer cases. In a recent case, Lance secured a significant settlement for a client whose landlord had refused to make the client's home habitable, including leaving the client without heat and water. With Lance's help, the client has resources to move to a safer home.

Outstanding Emeritus Attorney Award Eleanor Powers – After retiring from estate planning law in Texas, Eleanor Powers and her husband John moved to Asheville where she began volunteering with Pisgah Legal's MAVL program in 2009. Eleanor is committed to ensuring

clients have her assistance for end-of-life legal matters. She meets with terminally-ill and elderly clients in their homes, the hospital or hospice. In the last two years, Eleanor has provided pro bono representation to 28 clients, including a patient in hospice care following a stroke.

You can read the entire press release [here](#), and view more pictures from the 2019 Pro Bono Awards [here](#).