

Award winners

Judges honored as 'Champions for Justice'

By Tom Kirvan
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On a daily basis the legal paths of Elizabeth Pezzetti and Joan Young seldom cross as respective members of the probate and circuit court benches in Oakland County.

But October 15 was different, notably so for a pair of judges whose work on behalf of legal aid programs converged into a coveted honor they received during a special luncheon ceremony at the Auburn Hills campus of Cooley Law School.

Judges Young and Pezzetti were honored with the "Champions for Justice" award at the event, which served as a fund-raiser for family law legal services in Oakland County, specifically the Family Law Assistance Project (FLAP) and Common Ground. A sell-out crowd of more than 150 was on hand for the occasion that served as a fitting tribute to the judges for "their dedication to providing legal services to low-income people in Oakland County," according to Ashley Lowe, director of FLAP and an associate professor at Cooley.

For years, Judge Pezzetti and Judge Young have been part of a task force created to address the issue of furnishing legal aid services to the poor in Oakland County. The task force also included the legal service providers in the county, the leadership of the Oakland County Bar Association, and social service agencies such as HAVEN. The task force, according to Lowe, devised a plan to divide the legal services work in the county between the Women's Survival Center and Legal Aid and Defender. But when in 2003 the WSC unexpectedly closed its doors, the task force, again led by Judges Young and Pezzetti, swung back into action to ensure that services would be available, creating FLAP.

"We honored these judges because they have been consistent voices on the task force and in the community in general advocating for access to legal services to all those in need in Oakland County," said Lowe. "In addition, they use their courtrooms as examples of how to treat self-represented parties, who may not understand the legal process but are still entitled to dignity and respect."

Judge Pezzetti, who has served as chief of the Oakland County Probate Court since January 2007, spent nearly 15 years in private practice with Dickinson Wright before being appointed to the bench in 2000. She has been active with the Oakland County Inn of Court, serving a two-year term as chancellor, and over the past few years has urged the Michigan Legislature to enact reforms to the state's mental health system. She said she was "humbled" by the award from Cooley.

"Due to the teamwork of many parties, FLAP is up and running and very effective," Judge Pezzetti said this week. "I appreciate being honored for being part of the team."

Judge Young, who has served as chief of the Oakland County Circuit Court as well as Probate Court during her tenure on the bench, has helped preside over the Adult Treatment Court, better known as the "drug court program," since 2002, sharing the responsibilities with Judge Colleen O'Brien. Through a variety of organizations, she has worked to combat domestic violence as well as child abuse and neglect.

"It was a very pleasant surprise to receive the honor," said Judge Young, who praised her staff for their efforts in assisting pro se litigants. "This is an award that should be shared with many people who support legal aid work."

Professor Lowe, in presenting the Champion for Justice award to Judge Young last week, saluted the Oakland County jurist for the fact that she "spoke up and reminded the community that legal services are critical in family law cases, especially those that involve domestic violence." Lowe also praised Judge Young's efforts on behalf of "unrepresented" litigants.

"At FLAP we had already started a pro se program, but we were only working with a limited number of clients," said Lowe at the October 15 ceremony. "That program has since expanded significantly. Judge Young and I have worked on a plan to help provide assistance to pro se litigants, regardless of income. In the not too distant future, we will start a pilot program where anyone who files a divorce pro se will receive information about FLAP and Common Ground clinics so that they can proceed effectively and efficiently with their divorce. We believe this will improve access to justice for all litigants."

In presenting the honor to Judge Pezzetti, Lowe said she has valued the advice and support that the Probate Court jurist has offered since they first met as attorneys with Dickinson Wright.

"She mentored me and gave me opportunities that, I feared, might have been over my pay grade," Lowe said with a smile in recalling their days at the Detroit-based law firm.

"In the 12 years that I have known here, I have gone back to her time after time for help with a project that I believed would increase access to family law legal services," Lowe said. "Each time, she has welcomed me, mentored me, and advised me how to put together the services needed in the community."

In short, Lowe said the community owes the two Oakland County judges a special debt of gratitude.

"Both Judges Young and Pezzetti constantly impress me with their professionalism and commitment to ensuring that everyone who comes before them is afforded equal access to justice," Lowe said.

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