

When most people, myself included, read the statements by the people who have been selected for the honor of receiving the Pro Bono Publico Award, they are moved by the heartwarming stories of people who have been helped by the extraordinary contributions made by these recipients. We read of these worthy efforts, and we all feel better as lawyers and as members of our communities. I, on the other hand, have no such edifying story to tell. Long ago, when I heard Racehorse Haines compare “people” lawyers to “thing” lawyers, I knew instantaneously that I was meant to be a thing lawyer. As with perhaps too many lawyers who do work for the common good, I have made my contribution while staying within my comfort level – trying to improve the legal aid delivery system, particularly within New Mexico, while not straying any more than occasionally into the realm of people lawyers. Because this is not the kind of work I associate with the Pro Bono Publico Award, I am truly shocked to receive it. I am grateful to the ABA Pro Bono Committee for recognizing this systemic work. I am proud to have been nominated by the State Bar of New Mexico for this award.

I want to thank the State Bar of New Mexico, not for nominating me, but rather for giving me the opportunity to work to improve the legal aid system. Without the support of the State Bar, I would have been unable to work on any of the endeavors we have undertaken to improve access to the civil legal system by low income people. In 1994, when federal funding for our legal services programs was cut and restrictions were adopted, the Board of Bar Commissioners supported efforts to secure pro bono lawyers for those who would now be unable to secure representation from a legal services program. When it became apparent that federal funding was not going to be replaced any time soon, the State Bar leaders and others worked to obtain state funding and then nominated me to serve as the chair of that state funding commission. The State Bar supported efforts to expand services to the rural parts of the State through a non-LSC funded telephone help line. The State Bar provided the original structure for planning efforts to make our delivery system more effective and efficient. When it appeared that legal aid support efforts in New Mexico should transition from a bar committee to an Access to Justice Commission, the State Bar supported that change and has supported the Commission. The State Bar was instrumental in drafting the New Mexico Ten Step Pro Bono Plan and in revising our pro bono rules, both of which were later adopted by our Supreme Court. The State Bar, along with our Supreme Court, worked to obtain significant state funding for legal aid.

There are many reasons why a lawyer volunteers time for the public good – parent-instilled values, law school professionalism training, religious or community teaching, and peer and firm approval. To some extent all of the factors influenced me. Frank Earl Hering wrote: “And harken with your soul until the call to live and serve has waked you from your sleep.” To serve is to live. For me, only when we lawyers do good, do we do well.

I thank the State Bar for allowing me the privilege of being involved in the many efforts we have undertaken to improve access to justice. I accept this honor knowing full well that on each project I have worked there have been others who have made more significant contributions. Without the work of the staff and officers of the State Bar and

without the contributions of many members of the State Bar, including many of the legal aid providers, I could not have undertaken the projects on which I have worked. It is they who deserve this honor. Thank you for making me their proxy.

Sarah M. Singleton
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