

Keith Maynard of Wood, Atter, Wolf receives the 2009 Jacksonville Area Legal Aid Pro Bono Award

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The St. Johns County branch of Jacksonville Area Legal Aid (JALA) recently recognized the tireless efforts of six of its volunteer attorneys who have gone above and beyond to help meet the legal needs of the county's underserved population.

Among the many generous attorneys who have assisted legal aid in its mission during 2009, the contributions of Rusty Collins, Howard McGillin, Keith Maynard, James Kowalski, Tania Schmidt-Alpers and Jane Miller have stood out.

"These are all such outstanding attorneys," said St. Johns County JALA Managing Attorney Megan Wall. "We could never be able to thank them enough for their hard work and dedication to their community."

Keith Maynard has contributed to legal aid and the community in so many areas of law: consumer, housing, family, contracts, property, and even pro se forms clinics and pro bono advice clinics. The former public defender and University of Baltimore Law School graduate makes time for all this pro bono work despite his full-time position at Jacksonville's Wood, Atter & Wolf, where he specializes in Family law, Criminal Law, Bankruptcy, and Consumer law. In his spare time, Maynard flies a helicopter for the National Guard. "Keith's experience in so many areas of law makes him a tremendously valuable asset to St. Johns County Legal Aid," Wall said.

Howard McGillin has represented numerous legal aid clients in senior cases, consumer and housing law, and also assists with the pro bono advice clinic. A West Point and University of Florida Law School graduate, McGillin served 24 years in the U.S. Army. He is a partner at Fairbanks & McGillin, P.L., and practices primarily in the areas of estate planning, probate, civil and military law. "Howard's skill and experience with all things military is a major benefit to a community with a large military population."

"Jane Miller is like a volunteer member of our staff," Wall said. "She comes to our office on Wednesdays to meet with people in our conference room who need wills done and does them for the low-income, elderly, and disabled people in our community."

Tania Schmidt-Alpers represents nearly every victim of domestic violence in conjunction with the Betty Griffin House. While some of her work is paid for by a grant, when the grant money runs out, Schmidt-Alpers does not.

“Year after year, the grant runs out rather quickly, but Tania continues to represent those in need,” Wall said. “She puts in hundreds of extra hours on hundreds of cases. She basically runs her own legal aid program for domestic violence victims.”

In addition, she assists with pro se classes and conducts public education lectures on domestic violence and family law topics. Schmidt-Alpers is a Quinnipiac University School of Law graduate and specializes in family law.

Rusty Collins started taking cases for St. Johns County Legal Aid one year ago after graduating from Florida Coastal School of Law. “He was in court with cases before he even had an assigned bar number!” Wall said. “Rusty has taken more than 150 pro bono cases in the last year, mainly in the areas of foreclosure defense and consumer matters and has handled many pro bono advice clinics for us. As he explains it, he was a new attorney, he wanted the experience, and when the economy crashed he wanted to do his part to help. He was a natural at it because of his vast experience doing title work prior to attending law school.”

Jim Kowalski not only has taken on a lion’s share of foreclosure and credit repair cases for legal aid, but he has taught and coached a cadre of attorneys throughout the region to do the same. The result is a team of approximately 20 attorneys who can come to the defense of a low-income St. Johns County resident who is in danger of losing his or her home or who is on the verge of bankruptcy.

“The Fair Debt Collection Practices Act, the Truth in Lending Act, the Deceptive and Unfair Practices Act, and countless other federal and state laws, rules, and regulations make up the area of law known as consumer law,” Wall said. “It is impenetrable. Jim’s intelligence, dedication and commitment along with his team of volunteer attorneys are saving family homes and defending low-income people in credit disputes.”

Kowalski, a University of San Francisco School of Law graduate specializes in civil and commercial litigation, debtor and creditor law and personal injury law.

“These attorneys have made such a positive impact on our community that it really is impossible to measure. They are wonderful examples of the charge by the Florida Supreme Court to all attorneys, ‘One client. One attorney. One promise,’” says Wall.

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