

2011 Tennessee Legal Aid Top Performers

Russ Overby, raises an issue that results in over \$200 savings for Tennesseans who applies for assistance to pay Medicare premiums

In a twist of circumstance this year, one of the co-winners of the TALS B. Riney Green Award actually nominated the other winner. What a fitting occurrence for an award that seeks to “a way to recognize and emphasize the value the access to justice community has for a particular kind of accomplishment – one that promotes inter-program cooperation and strengthens access to justice across the state.”

One winner, who was profiled here recently, Beth Bates, of West Tennessee Legal Services, also nominated her co-winner: Russ Overby of the Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland. For those of us who work with Russ and Beth, the synergy in their winning this award together was perfect. Both have contributed so much for their clients and to other advocates across program lines.

Russ has many legal accomplishments, notably his work as lead co-counsel on the landmark Samuels case which revolutionized the weight given treating physicians’ opinions in Social Security Disability cases by the Tennessee Disability Determination Section in the 1980s. But this award went to Russ for his ability collaborate, teach, and bring others along through his advocacy efforts.

Throughout Russ’ career he has built bridges to other attorneys and advocates as he has represented his clients. He has engaged in long-term meaningful dialogue with state officials in the highest levels of Tennessee government. He works to keep open channels of communication with DHS and other state department officials. He also has been invaluable in leading CLE’s and training sessions of advocates across the state.

The very week we were at Equal Justice University giving Russ this award, his quiet advocacy produced another landmark result. Russ had raised with DHS an issue where clients who were eligible for assistance in paying their Medicare premiums were not aware of the assistance and others who had applied for assistance experienced a delay of several months in obtaining assistance. Russ raised this issue with officials with the Tennessee Department of Human Services with respect to these problems.

The result of this work was that DHS revised their application to make it clear that people could apply for assistance to pay for their Medicare premiums. They also devised an expedited approval process so that assistance in paying Medicare premiums would begin in the month that Medicare is first received.

This expedited approval process will save over \$200 for every low income Tennessean who applies for assistance to pay Medicare premiums.

But possibly the most poignant comment that can be made about Russ comes from the words in Beth’s nomination of Russ for the Green Award: “Throughout all of the above, despite vast knowledge, Russ has always reached out to include and work as a team player with other advocates across the state. He uses his knowledge in a forceful but thoughtful and wise manner that is respectful of other advocates.”

~ Erik Cole, Director, TALS

Winner Winner at the Chicken Dinner ...

Just two weeks ago, a group of 160 of my colleagues, friends, and heroes (coincidentally, they are all the same group) gathered for a few days of learning and laughter at Equal Justice University, Class of 2011. The highlight of the conference occurred during the awards dinner on Wednesday night, October 12. It was not the chicken shish kabobs and rice. It was not the beautiful peacock feathers on the tables. It was not even the president of LSC, Jim Sandman—who simultaneously inspired and grounded us with his passionate yet humble address. In fact, his rousing words whetted our appetites for the culmination of the evening, the biggest award given each year by TALS, the B. Riney Green Award.

The official description states that the B. Riney Green award is a way to “recognize and emphasize the value the access to justice community has for a particular kind of accomplishment – one that promotes inter-program cooperation and strengthens access to justice across the state”.

Weeks before the event a committee met, carefully considered many nominations, and with great conviction and passion, two awardees were chosen. And the winners were....Beth Bates of West TN Legal Services and Russ Overby with the Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland! And so it is that this blog post focuses on Beth...with a subsequent post forthcoming about our very remarkable Russ.

I was personally thrilled for Beth—and in complete agreement with the committee who chose her. The official nomination (by Theresa-Vay Smith) included these words:

“Beth worked on the DHS waiver of food stamp overpayment for agency errors. Several other states have looked to TN for guidance and been able to persuade their state to adopt the waiver. Beth was asked to testify before Congress on Social Security issues affecting our clients in TN. She is a member of the Benefits Taskforce workgroup working with DHS on DDS issues. She is invaluable on that taskforce. She chaired the benefits taskforce for many years. These are just a few of her collaborative efforts. Beth is an excellent advocate. She is faithful and dependable and never seeks the limelight. She truly deserves the award for what she has done over the past year, but also for all of her great work over many years!”

For me, those last three sentences truly resonated. She is an EXCELLENT advocate. And she NEVER seeks the limelight. And for the past three years that I have known her, she has proven herself as the social security guru—the DDS superhero—and the benefits authority extraordinaire. I have had the privilege of seeing Beth give presentations. I have been grateful for her expertise on the benefits task force. And mostly, I have come to learn that she is one of the smartest and most caring women I know! Please join me in congratulating Beth Bates, a most deserving recipient of the B. Riney Green award.

~ Lisa Primm, Director, Policy and Training at TALS

And End of the Year Treasure

Shayla Purifoy Receives New Advocate of the Year Award (2011)

Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services typically hosts Equal Justice University in September each year. This year, however, we decided to move it to October – for the life of me, I cannot recall why. In our staff meeting yesterday I said, “I prefer September for EJU.” After Lisa Primm said she “loves October,” I re-considered my statement. “Nah, I still like September,” I thought. Then, I walked into my office and looked out the window. I

remember the unexpected visual delight as I drove to Paris Landing State Park. The leaves were beautiful shades of orange, yellow, and brown. Indeed, fall is my favorite time of the year.

The completion of EJU is also my favorite time of year. Well, not like that! I enjoy hearing the comments written on evaluation forms and laughing with co-workers about the multiple comments we received about the temperature. Aside from evaluations, I also have an opportunity to review the award nominations and reminisce about the awards dinner. My first thought – Was she a beauty queen?

Shayla Purifoy received the Advocate of the Year Award. I chuckled when I thought about taking her photo. She posed with such great confidence and an air of ‘beauty queen.’ And, she is a beauty both inside and out. Her compassion for women and children resonates from the work she does at Memphis Area Legal Services as well as her commitment to raising awareness about domestic violence.

In her nomination of Purifoy, Sonja White, managing attorney of the Family Law and Domestic Violence Unit at MALS, wrote: “[Attorney Purifoy] joined the Memphis Area Legal Services in 2008 as an entry level staff attorney in their Family Law Unit. Her area of concentration is representing victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking in contested orders of protection hearings. During her three years of service, she has demonstrated a strong dedication and passion for protecting the legal rights of domestic violence victims. In the past year, she has experienced a case success rate of 80% and has provided service to approximately 549 women and children.”

Purifoy is an active member of the Memphis Area Women Council, which also endorsed her for the Advocate of the Year Award. Her volunteer efforts include participation in the annual October Domestic Violence Awareness Month rallies organized by the Council and the Erase Domestic Crime Collaborative. She also supports the annual Walk a Mile in her Shoes event hosted by the Memphis Area Women’s Council and Memphis Men for Memphis Women that affords her an opportunity to recruit men to walk, collects high heels for men to wear (humm), solicits donations and participate as ‘walker.’

During her award acceptance speech, she was transparent about the work she does and her outward expression of sincerity nearly brought me to tears. I tuned in carefully to her thoughtful words. She has discovered something, I think. She has uncovered how to combine her compassion for service with an apparent passion for seeing justice. This work means something to her.

Cheers! Congratulations, Shayla Purifoy! The women and children finding themselves in your service are certainly in good caring hands.

~ Trenay Bynum, TALS

Last updated on November 17, 2011.

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