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TBA Names 2017 Public Service Award Recipients

Tennessee Lawyers and Law Student to be Recognized for Commitment to Public Service

Two distinguished Tennessee attorneys and a recent University of Tennessee College of Law graduate will be honored with the state's top public service awards at a ceremony in January. The awards were presented by the Tennessee Bar Association at its 2017 Public Service Luncheon on Jan. 14 at the Downtown DoubleTree Hotel in Nashville. Held each year as part of the association's Leadership Conference, the luncheon featured remarks by TBA President Jason Long and other leaders from the legal community.

Harris Gilbert Pro Bono Volunteer of the Year Award

The Pro Bono Volunteer of the Year was awarded to Susan Gruber, who's made it her job to serve indigent clients. A homemaker who maintains her law license, Gruber volunteers with Legal Aid of East Tennessee every week, handling over 60 cases in the last three years.

"She is a consummate professional and a student, constantly expanding her craft," said Paige Evatt of Legal Aid of East Tennessee - Chattanooga, who nominated Gruber. Evatt said that Gruber has handled cases in practices areas of mortgage and foreclosure, bankruptcy, unemployment, expungement, driver's license, EEOC, conservatorship, consumer debt, garnishment, wills, probate, deeds, powers of attorney, landlord/tenant, Medicare, Medicaid, TennCare, small estate and more - all as a volunteer.

“Susan is always ready to take on a new challenge. If there is an area of law with which she isn’t acquainted, she will personally research that area until she has a broad base of knowledge from which she can serve clients,” said Evatt.

Ashley T. Wiltshire Public Service Attorney of the Year Award

Assistant Public Defender in the 23rd Judicial District Richard Taylor is this year’s Public Service Attorney of the Year. Taylor earned the recognition after his years of work on behalf of the Drug Court program, which focuses on rehabilitating non-violent drug offenders.

“Mr. Taylor is a motivator who inspires co-workers, court volunteers and his clients,” said Clay Kevin Batts, the coordinator of the Drug Court program in District 23 and the attorney who nominated Taylor for the honor. “He knows that it takes more than what the traditional judicial system offers to guide clients on their return to society as productive citizens.”

Taylor has volunteered hundreds of hours with the program, even taking his weekends to personally transport more than 600 clients to treatment clinics across the state. He helped pioneer the district’s Sober Living facilities, where clients can live in supportive group housing and adjust to life after treatment. The Sober Living facilities have drastically reduced the recidivism rates of offenders who go through the program.

Law Student Volunteer of the Year Award

Kirsten Jacobson was recognized as this year’s Law Student Volunteer of the Year, after logging more than 900 hours of pro bono work during her time at the University of Tennessee College of Law and receiving a prestigious Equal Justice Works fellowship.

Doug Blaze of the UT College of Law, who nominated Jacobson, said that her “work ethic, dedication and impact far exceeds all other students involved in UT Pro Bono over the past twenty-plus years that I have been involved in the program.”

During Jacobson’s tenure as student director of UT Pro Bono, the number of law students participating the program increased to over 40 percent, Blaze said. Jacobson’s post-graduate fellowship is allowing her to work with the Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services.

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