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Legal Aid Association of California honors 2014 Family Law Awards recipients; joins California Commission on Access to Justice to honor 2013 Award of Merit recipient

SAN FRANCISCO – The Legal Aid Association of California (LAAC) honored a pro bono team from Arnold & Porter LLC and Melanie Snider, the family law facilitator from Butte and Lake counties, as recipients of the 2014 Family Law Awards.

LAAC also joined the California Commission on Access to Justice to honor Deborah Chase, recipient of the 2013 Joint Award of Merit.

The awards ceremony took place March 7 as part of the 2014 Family Law and Self-Help Conference, held at the Administrative Office of the Courts.

Since 2003, the LAAC Family Law Awards have been given to family law advocates in recognition of their outstanding dedication and commitment to legal services for low-income Californians. Honorees may be recognized in one of three categories: pro bono work, direct representation, and family law facilitator or self-help provider.

The Joint Award of Merit recognizes those who demonstrate a commitment to increasing access to justice for self-represented litigants, primarily low-income persons.

“LAAC is always honored to recognize the work of court staff and pro bono counsel who help shepherd California’s families through crises,” said Salena Copeland, LAAC executive director.

“Arnold & Porter’s attorneys tackled a difficult case and helped their client get justice, and Melanie is loved by her fellow advocates in the courts.

“LAAC is also happy to partner with the California Commission on Access to Justice to honor Deborah Chase with the 2013 Award of Merit. We wanted to honor her at the Family Law and Self-Help Conference so she could receive the award with an audience of people who know her well,” she said.

A team from Arnold & Porter LLP received this year's pro bono Family Law Award for their work with Legal Aid Society of San Mateo County's Domestic Violence Collaborative. Team members included Michael Berta, partner at Arnold & Porter LLP, Angel Garganta, now partner at Venable LLP, Emily Hostage, associate at Arnold & Porter LLP, and Preetam Shingavi, now in-house counsel at drchrono.

The team provided more than 300 hours of work in a case which ensured protection for the client, a domestic violence survivor.

The case builds on Arnold & Porter's long tradition of helping those in need obtain protection of the law, according to Sean SeLegue, partner at Arnold & Porter LLP and chair of the San Francisco office's pro bono committee.

"The office's lawyers have been particularly drawn to helping persons seeking protection from domestic violence," he said.

"The efforts of the Arnold & Porter LLP team were incredible. Not only did they go well beyond what they thought they signed up for, but they went far beyond their own practice area of IP law," said Lauren Zorfias, former executive director of the Legal Aid Society of San Mateo County.

Hostage and SeLegue accepted the award on behalf of the team.

Melanie Snider, family law facilitator for Butte and Lake counties, received recognition in the family law facilitator and self-help provider categories.

In addition to her role as facilitator, Snider works as supervising attorney for the SHARP (Self Help Assistance and Referral Program) for Butte, Lake and Tehama counties.

Her colleagues in both Butte and Lake counties nominated her for her work on streamlining services and increasing coordination, and the impact that she has on families in those counties.

"It's inspiring to attend meetings with Melanie," said Gloria Wyeth, SHARP coordinator. "Her commitment to family law and helping pro pers and the people who serve them is so evident and genuine that people warm up to her immediately.

"Barriers to communication and cooperation simply evaporate after about 20 minutes, and people begin talking about coordinating efforts and improving services."

Snider's work includes developing training tools and a settlement process that assists litigants to settle cases without going to trial. She is an active participant in statewide coordination efforts.

“Melanie is professional, compassionate, and thorough,” said Casse Waldman Forczek, Lake County Law Library director.

“She is dedicated and committed as she continues providing equal access to justice, and, in these times of limited resources, she strives to find ways to provide more assistance to self-represented litigants by partnering the counties of Butte, Tehama, and Lake.”

In addition to the Family Law Awards, the California Commission on Access to Justice joined LAAC in recognizing Deborah Chase as the 2013 Joint Award of Merit recipient.

Chase works as senior attorney for the Judicial Council of California, Administrative Office of the Courts. She serves as judge pro tem for Superior Court of California, County of Alameda.

A member of the team that developed the statewide self-represented litigants action plan, Chase is primarily responsible for California’s self-help center guidelines. As part of both the Elkins Family Law Task Force and the Elkins Implementation Task Force, Chase helped conduct a comprehensive review of family law proceedings to develop recommendations for California courts.

Chase holds both masters and doctoral degrees in psychology. She received the California Lawyer of the Year (CLAY) Award in 2002.

“Deborah has worked tirelessly throughout her career to open the doors of justice for low-income family law litigants and to give these litigants an effective voice once they are before the court,” said Justice Kathleen O’Leary, president justice of the California Court of Appeal, Fourth District.

For more information, please contact Salena Copeland at (415) 834-0100 x 303.

About Legal Aid Association of California

Founded in 1984, the Legal Aid Association of California (“LAAC”) is a nonprofit organization created to ensure the effective delivery of legal services to low-income and underserved people and families throughout California. LAAC is the statewide membership organization of 87 nonprofit legal services organizations in the state. Our members provide high-quality legal services to our state’s most vulnerable populations.

These services to low-income and other underrepresented individuals form an essential safety net in California and often ensure that the programs’ clients have access to life’s basic necessities, such as food, safe and affordable housing, freedom from violence, health care, employment, economic self-sufficiency, and equal access to justice through the legal system.

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