Making a Difference

The Pennsylvania Bar News column that highlights Pennsylvania attorneys who make a difference in their communities by providing extraordinary pro bono service and/or other community services in the public interest.

Michael E. Fetzner, Erie County

Michael E. Fetzner is a shareholder in the Erie office of Knox McLaughlin Gorrnal & Sennett PC. He is a former PBA Zone 7 governor.

Detail your pro bono work.

My pro bono involvement began as a member of the Erie County Legal Aid Volunteer Attorneys (LAVA) program created in 1982. My involvement since then has been to take at least two pro bono cases per year, primarily in the areas of real estate or civil litigation.

Why do you participate in pro bono?

Most of the nonprofit organizations in our county are struggling with funding. Many have had their funding significantly reduced due to economic conditions.

I believe it is incumbent upon every attorney to give back to his or her community by making a financial contribution to the local legal services program or by taking pro bono cases each year.

How did you become involved?

The Erie County Bar Association created its LAVA program when the federal government significantly reduced the funding for Northwest Pennsylvania Legal Services. I was a member of the committee that created the collaboration with Northwest Pennsylvania Legal Services and I have remained involved ever since.

Have your pro bono cases dealt with legal issues different from your regular practice areas? If so, how did you adapt?

Initially I was handling all types of cases. I then became concerned that I should handle only cases related to my practice concentrations. As a result, I now deal primarily with real estate and civil litigation matters.

What have been the personal rewards?

The personal reward is my ability to give back to my profession in areas where assistance is needed. Nearly all of the clients I have represented truly appreciated having an attorney to assist them in matters of great concern to them.

Detail your other community service.

Metropolitan Erie YMCA (Board of Directors, past chair, Board of Trustees), Penn State Dickinson School of Law (1834 Society member, John Reed Society member), Village at Luther Square (Board of Directors, Finance Committee member), St. Peter’s Cathedral (Council member), Pennsylvania Bar Foundation (Board of Directors), Erie County Bar Association (Executive Committee member, past president, Workers’ Compensation Council member, Attorneys and Kids Together (AKT) program member, chair of yearly Law Day luncheon).

How does it make a difference?

The Erie County Bar Association created the Attorneys and Kids Together (AKT) program through which local attorneys mentor school-age children who are living in shelters in the community due to abuse that has occurred in their families. This program involves holding events for the children, beginning in the spring and ending just before they return to school. It has been a tremendous success and has resulted in long-term relationships between the mentors and the children.