

Westmoreland County's pro bono helps needy with legal matters

BY MARYANN GOGNIAT
EIDEMILLER
For The Bulletin

There are two reasons why Terry O'Halloran of Unity Township has been the Westmoreland Bar Association Foundation's Pro Bono Attorney of the Year for the last three years.

One reason, program coordinator Iva Munk said, is because "He never says 'no' to me" when she asks him to take a case.

The economy is the other reason.

O'Halloran has a law office in Greensburg and a general practice with a specialty in bankruptcy. The economic downturn has increased the number of private clients who are seeking relief from their debts, as well as the number of cases referred from the foundation's program.

"They run the gamut of people, from old to young," he said. "I would say that a good fourth or third of my pro bono clients are over 65, and that just breaks your heart because at some point, you should reach a point in your life where you should have paid your dues."



TERRY O'HALLORAN

(See Westmoreland on Page 3)

Westmoreland

(Continued from Page 1)

Instead, the senior citizens are in such financial distress that they turn to the pro bono program for help in filing bankruptcy.

"Pro bono" is from the Latin term "pro bono publico," which means "for the common good." In other words, qualifying people may receive free or reduced-fee services for civil matters such as bankruptcy, divorce, custody and other non-fee-generating legal matters.

According to Munk, the office in Greensburg receives 1,000 to 1,200 calls annually, with about half of them referred to other services. For instance, housing issues may be handled by Westmoreland Community Action, and criminal cases are referred to the public defender's office at the courthouse.

More than 150 Westmoreland County attorneys have participated in Pro Bono's Lawyer-For-The-Day program, the separate custody program and a reduced fee program that charges \$40 an hour, plus costs. Clients additionally pay court fees for filing for divorce, but there often aren't fees in landlord and tenant disputes.

"Last year, we helped a combined total of 550 people, and 162 were strictly pro bono, with no payment to anyone, anywhere," Munk said.

The majority of the clients are women. Most of the younger ones have custody issues, and the older women tend to have consumer problems. The majority are from Greensburg, and so far this year, the next biggest populations, in descending order, have been from Mount Pleasant, Latrobe, Ligonier and New Kensington. In 2008, the ranking after Greensburg was Mount Pleasant, Latrobe, Monessen and Ligonier.

Nearly 8,500 people have been helped since the pro bono program was started in 1991. Last year, Munk said, 64 attorneys processed the cases, and five attorneys specialize in custody issues.

O'Halloran, a graduate of Dickinson Law School in Carlisle, has been in practice since 1975 and has been involved in the pro bono program for many years. Because of his high annual caseload, he received the Pro Bono Attorney of the Year Award in 2007, 2008 and 2009.

"It's just one of those things, that you give back some of what you have been given," he said.

In the bankruptcy referrals, he sees many elderly clients who are

struggling with fixed incomes and rising costs.

"Just the medicines are getting out of hand," he said. "They are really stuck between coming up with money for housing and medicine, and guess what happens? For most of them, the problem isn't overspending, it's underearning. Many don't have the ability to go out and get more money. They may be physically unable to take on a job, or another job, because some of them are already doing something part-time, and nobody would hire them if they could work."

Some elderly clients are having financial difficulty because years ago they cosigned a loan for a family member who isn't paying the debt, O'Halloran added, "And now they are getting slammed."

Many younger bankruptcy clients were "doing fine" handling their debts until they lost their jobs. Others became underemployed and can't keep up with credit card payments that increased with rising interest rates.

"So the minimum payments they were able to make last year, they can't make now with reduced income, and the outstanding balance is coming back to bite them," O'Halloran said. "The unemployment and underemployment are really increasing the bankruptcy load."

To qualify for the pro bono service, the case has to be a civil matter within Westmoreland County, and the applicant's income must meet federal poverty guidelines. Family size and monthly income are considered, and for qualifying people, the service may be free. For information, contact 724-837-5539 or www.westbar.org/pro_bono_program. The office is located at 218 South Maple St. in Greensburg.

Great Dane tallest dog

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A dog named Titan lived up to his name Thursday when he earned the title world's tallest dog.

It was one of more than 30 records announced or set on Nov. 12 — the official Guinness World Record Day — but the only animal to be honored.

The 4-year-old white Great Dane from San Diego is blind, deaf, epileptic and undergoes acupuncture and chiropractic adjustments every three weeks, owner Diana Taylor said.