Pro bono attorneys acknowledged

Pro bono.Org held its inaugural Pro Bono Awards in Johannesburg on 7 October to highlight and acknowledge the work done by individuals and firms in the private legal profession; to raise the awareness of pro bono work; and to encourage more lawyers and firms to participate.

The guest speaker at the event was Judge of the Gauteng Division of the High Court (formerly the North Gauteng High Court), Kathleen Satchwell, who said that there is value in working for others, in helping others when they cannot help themselves but added: ‘...we all know the Mao story about teaching a man to fish for himself. And where you show people there is a way out of a problem ... when you share knowledge and skills and people realise things can be done – and by them - then you are empowering others.’

Judge Satchwell said that empowerment is on many levels. She said that tackling an obstructionist or rude or careless civil servant shows your client that civil servants are meant to be working for him or her and all of us, which empowers the citizen. Judge Satchwell made another example by saying that holding government, an employer or service provider accountable reminds your client that dishonesty or incompetence can be challenged and that citizens do not have to put up with it, adding that this is empowering the citizen.

Judge Satchwell noted that none of this is easy. ‘I know that there is a lot of waiting, a lot of sitting in cold rooms, a lot of listening, and much heartache when there is no help to be offered. The victories are very few. I worked as an attorney for 18 years in Johannesburg. Many of my clients had no access to telephones, transport, documents and records. Somehow injustices done to the poor and the marginalised were always exacerbated by their lack of access to facilities such as a photocopy machine and my lack of time and energy,’ she said.

Judge Satchwell applauded everyone who has worked with ProBono.Org. She added that this kind of work is seen as ‘extra’ or ‘on top of’ or ‘additional to’ a real legal practice because ‘a real legal practice’ has to pay rent, salaries, buy stationary, repair equipment etcetera. She said: ‘We all have to work out how to keep legal practices alive and profitable. But to do pro bono work is either to earn less or to work harder. Whichever happens – it is a sacrifice of sorts – of money or time or energy.’

believed that as people become more aware of the awards they will enter.

Awards were given to law firms or individuals who contributed in pro bono work in 2013. The winners were:

In the category of –
• The most pro bono hours by a law firm with:
  – Over 50 professionals: International law firm, Faskin Martineau Attorneys.
  – Between ten and 50 practitioners: Johannesburg law firm, Mervyn Taback Inc.
  – Firm with less than ten practitioners: Johannesburg law firm, Mabaso Attorneys.
• Full time pro bono attorney that undertook the most pro bono hours: Tricia Erasmus of DLA Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr.
• Part time pro bono attorney: Elze Lamprecht of Norton Rose Fulbright South Africa.
• Advocate that undertook the most hours: Nadine Fourie.
• Journalist that gave pro bono work the most coverage: Victoria John of the Mail and Guardian.