

# WNC lawyers honored for pro bono work

## Need increased in recession

By Sandra V. Rodriguez

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ASHEVILLE — The problems started with a feeling of pain, and numbness, in one of Christie Johnson's toes.

Johnson's visit to her physician, then the emergency room, was the beginning of a terrifying journey that left her feeling helpless and alone. Doctors diagnosed Johnson with a blood-clotting disorder, and after suffering complications from an infection, her leg was amputated below the knee.

“I was truly devastated,” Johnson said to about 80 lawyers Wednesday at The Venue in downtown Asheville. “I didn't know how I was going to pay the medical bills that I knew would be coming very soon.”

After trying and failing to get on disability and Medicaid for two years, Johnson appealed to Pisgah Legal Services for help. Attorney Leah Broker, a volunteer with the Mountain Area Volunteer Lawyer Program run by Pisgah Legal Services, helped Johnson get on disability and Medicaid.

The luncheon where Johnson spoke was organized by the 28th Judicial District and PLS to recognize the volunteer work of attorneys in Western North Carolina. The individuals honored were Broker and Anna Hickman, of the firm Broker and Hamrick, P.A., in Asheville; Cynthia Alleman and Edna Ruffin Walker, both of whom have solo practices; and Brian Gulden of Patla, Straus, Robinson and Moore, P.A.

“My main mission today is to thank you all on behalf of the 10,000-plus people per year that you are helping,” said Jim Barrett, PLS director. Its services are centered in Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, Polk, Rutherford and Transylvania counties.

Lawyers were challenged to respond to the increased need during the recession, Barrett said, and “you stepped up in a big way.”

“It's really amazing, but we provide more pro bono hours than the state of Kansas, here in the western part of the state,” said Heidi Stewart, president of the Buncombe County Bar Association.

In 2009, 315 private attorneys donated about 4,416 service hours to provide free civil legal help to low-income people in the areas of housing, health care, income, domestic violence and consumer protection.



Leah Broker, right, and Anna Hamrick were recognized for providing Christie Johnson, center, the help she needed to get Medicaid and disability benefits. Members of the 28th Judicial District gathered Wednesday to honor area volunteers on Wednesday at The Venue in downtown Asheville.

### By the Numbers

- 581: Clients served by Mountain Area Volunteer Lawyer Program in 2009, up 20 percent from 2008
- 419: Clients helped through the MAVL Pro Bono Hotline.
- 4,416: Service hours donated by MAVL attorneys.

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The N.C. Bar Association has taken notice. Stewart announced the lawyers of the 28th Judicial District, which covers Buncombe County, will receive the 2010 Chief Justice Award. It's the third time they have been recognized by the state bar for their free legal help in the community.

Cynthia Alleman also will receive the William L. Thorpe Pro Bono Service Award from the state bar. She has contributed 245 volunteer hours since 1994 for the Mountain Area Volunteer Lawyer Program, primarily on guardianship cases.

“I don't know that you (lawyers) truly know what it means to have someone step up and speak for you when

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