



For Immediate Release:

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Stone and Christy Law Firm Awarded Statewide Pro Bono Service Award

Black Mountain Law Firm Recognized by NC Bar Association for Exemplary Volunteer Service



*Staff of Black Mountain Law Firm, Stone & Christy.
From L to R: James Ellis, William Christy, Tori Deal,
Carrie Maresh, and Bryant Webster.*

[Asheville] - Americans believe equal justice under the law is a right, not a privilege. In fact, the last four words of our Pledge of Allegiance are “justice for all.”

But justice is not always accessible to many in our community. It is well-known that if you commit a crime in U.S., then the court will appoint an attorney to represent you if you are unable to afford one.

But what happens if you are trying to escape an abusive spouse, or you are facing eviction and homelessness, or you are the victim of a predatory lender who has cleaned out your bank

account? In the U.S. there is no guarantee of legal representation in the civil legal system, even if you face a legal problem that impacts your safety, your livelihood, your health or your family. If you can’t afford to pay an attorney for help, it’s likely you would have to navigate the complex civil justice system alone and unprepared.

In our country many must rely on free legal aid programs and pro bono legal help when they face a life-altering civil legal problem. *Pro bono publico* means “for the public good,” and the American Bar Association says that lawyers should aspire to contribute at least 50 hours of free or “pro bono” legal services per year, to help people of limited means or nonprofit organizations that serve people in poverty. While the ABA recommends that each lawyer commit at least 50 hours of pro bono service a year, there are lawyers that generously give even more time.

Lawyers at the Black Mountain law firm of Stone and Christy provide hundreds of hours of free legal help to our neighbors in Western NC each year. The NC Bar Association will recognize their exemplary service by awarding them the statewide 2019 Law Firm Pro Bono Service Award. The firm will be honored during the 2019 NCBA Annual Meeting Awards Dinner on Thursday, June 20th at 7:30pm at the Amherst Gallery at the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, NC. It is well deserved recognition, as the law firm’s four attorneys provided 455 hours of pro bono

service last year alone and have provided thousands of hours in the past two decades. Staff attorney Bryant Webster is quick to point out that some of these hours were accumulated through multiple years.

The firm's four attorneys are William Christy, James Ellis, Barrett McFatter, and Bryant Webster. Three out of these four attorneys have been together for close to 20 years, with McFatter being the most recent addition to the firm, joining in 2014. They are supported by firm staff Donna Farr, Carrie Maresh and Tori Deal.

"We like being a small firm," says Christy. "We have deliberately stayed at four attorneys." Webster adds, "We jokingly say we're the mega-firm in Black Mountain."

The people they serve as pro bono clients come to them through a variety of channels. Some are formerly paying clients who are unable to continue affording an attorney due to severe life changes. The attorneys continue to represent them regardless of ability to pay. They also receive pro bono case referrals from local nonprofit Pisgah Legal Services.

Pisgah Legal Services provides free civil legal aid to more than 16,000 low-income people across WNC each year to solve housing problems, stop domestic violence and child abuse, secure health care and income, and address other urgent needs. But with more than 200 calls a week from people in crisis, the nonprofit's 25 staff attorneys cannot begin to meet all of the needs in the community.

Pisgah Legal Services depends on volunteer attorneys to donate their time and expertise to take on legal cases for clients living in poverty. More than 300 private attorneys volunteer their time through The Mountain Area Volunteer Lawyer (MAVL) Program, a partnership between the private bar and Pisgah Legal Services (PLS). Last year these attorney volunteers donated 3,993 hours of pro bono service to help PLS clients.

The relationship between the nonprofit and Stone & Christy is seamless, as they both provide valuable resources for people in need. "We are able to meet clients through Pisgah Legal and have them go through a screening process," says Webster. "We get the guarantee that they cannot afford an attorney, Pisgah Legal gets to serve more people through our volunteer work and most importantly, the client gets the help they need. It works beautifully."

Webster gives an example of a client he recently worked with: "I had a client whom I represented through Pisgah Legal's MAVL program. She worked for her husband's business and he never reported her income except as his own. Unfortunately, she suffered a series of strokes and needed to apply for Social Security Disability benefits. But when she applied there was no record of her earned income. I connected with some lawyers I knew from Pisgah Legal, and together we got her qualified for Medicaid, food benefits, disability payments and so on. I am still working with her. She cannot make it without help."

Attorney James Ellis adds, "I enjoy working with our pro bono clients through Pisgah Legal because it keeps me grounded. The situations they are in are tough and are made worse when they don't have resources. Our clients are doing the best they can and we're here to help."

The firm is known for keeping pro bono clients for many years, or as Webster describes it, “adopting them.” One client recently wrote Christy a letter where she stated her appreciation “for the years you put up with me and helped me with my legal problems. It’s been around 12 or 14 years. Thank you so much for everything and your patience with me.”

“It’s the most satisfying work we do,” says Christy. “The clients are in difficult situations and are extremely grateful for the help. People need representation because the system will just run you over.”