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Trisha M. Rich (left) receives the Maurice Weigle Exceptional Young Lawyer Award from David M. Bamlango, a partner at DLA Piper and one of the co-chairs of The Chicago Bar Association's and Chicago Bar Foundation's annual awards luncheon Monday at the Fairmont Chicago Millennium Park. Rich, an attorney at Holland & Knight LLP, started the Attorney Defense Initiative, a pro bono effort to help lawyers facing disciplinary charges before the Attorney Registration & Disciplinary Commission. *Photo provided by The Chicago Bar Foundation/Bill Richert*

CBF awards highlight pro bono attorneys

BY DAVID THOMAS
Law Bulletin staff writer

Not all attorneys can dedicate themselves to pro bono or public-interest work, but every attorney — regardless of his or her practice — can show up.

"You can show up at legal clinics. We can show up at our legal clinics and our firms," said Gary K. Wachtel, a senior director at Discover Financial Services. "We just have to continue to show up, giving our time, expertise and resources, and give profound help to those in need."

Honorees stress professional duty to serve others who can't access or afford legal help

Wachtel's comments came after he was announced as the recipient of the Outstanding Corporate Counsel Award at The Chicago Bar Association and Chicago Bar Foundation's annual pro bono and public service luncheon.

The luncheon was held in a packed banquet room at the Fairmont Chicago Millennium Park.

He was one of eight attorneys recognized for legal representation of those who otherwise can't access or afford it.

Wachtel has led Discover's legal team to log nearly 1,500 hours of pro bono service in the past two years and to open a domestic violence help desk at the Cook County courthouse in Rolling Meadows.

Each award winner discussed the need to do more to help people who can't afford legal services.

Sometimes those people in need are themselves lawyers, Trisha M. Rich, told the room. An attorney at Holland & Knight LLP, Rich started the Attorney Defense Initiative, a pro bono effort for lawyers who are facing disciplinary charges before the Illinois Attorney Registration & Disciplinary Commission.

Rich, recipient of the Maurice Weigle Exceptional Young Lawyer Award, said a sizable portion of

attorneys — between 19 and 28 percent — suffer either from substance abuse, depression or anxiety. The statistics are worse for attorneys who are in their first 10 years of practice, she added.

“Our profession is truly a noble one, and I truly believe as lawyers we have a moral obligation and responsibility to help the people in our communities and provide access to justice for the poor,” Rich said.

Kathleen M. Robson and Salvador J. Lopez, the eponymous partners from Robson & Lopez LLC, received The Edward J. Lewis II Pro Bono Service Award.

The two have worked 129 cases for CVLS, and they’ve put in hundreds of volunteer hours in at the Daley Center and in federal bankruptcy court.

“The need for help is there, so

please help,” Lopez urged the audience.

The award is named after a Jenner & Block LLP partner who chalked up thousands of hours in pro bono work before his death at 37 in 1997.

A \$50,000 award — The Kimball R. Anderson and Karen Gattis Anderson Public Interest Law Fellowship — was given to Sarah Katherine Hess, a staff attorney at the Legal Council for Health Justice.

In an April interview with Chicago Lawyer, Hess spoke about how, despite getting a full ride for law school tuition and fees, she had to take out loans to pay for her living expenses. In her remarks at the luncheon, she described the fellowship as granting her “the incredible freedom from the burden of loans.”

Hess works with children who are facing complicated health and legal issues. In her remarks, she emphasized the need for attorneys to help the poor navigate the legal landscape imposed on them.

“Our clients have to manage a bureaucracy just to buy their groceries,” Hess said.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Sheri H. Mecklenburg received The Richard J. Phelan Public Service Award, which is given to attorneys who work in the public sector.

Mecklenburg founded the Women’s DNA Initiative, a 501(c)(3) organization that pushed to address the backlog of 1,000 untested Cook County rape kits in 2003.

Dan Lesser, the director of economic justice at the Sargent Shriver National Center on Pover-

ty Law, was awarded The Thomas H. Morsch Public Service Award for his work leading food and nutrition advocacy efforts in the state.

Howard M. Rubin, a DePaul University College of Law professor who was awarded The Leonard Jay Schragger Award of Excellence, recalled how his first cases dealt with blatant discrimination.

He represented one woman who was having trouble receiving the full amount of her deceased husband’s life insurance policy because the policy contained a provision that reduced the coverage by 50 percent if the policyholder wasn’t white.

“Access to justice is needed today more than ever, and we are the guardians of the legal galaxy,” Rubin said.