

Pro Bono Attorney of the Month: Michael A. Rich, Esq.

This month, Nassau Suffolk Law Services Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP), along with the Nassau County Bar Association (NCBA) honors a long-standing stalwart of the Landlord/ Tenant Attorney of the Day Program: Michael A. Rich, Esq. Rich has been representing low income clients in District Court through the VLP for over 15 years, and has donated over 48 hours alone this year. This is the second time he has been nominated for this honor.

The Attorney of the Day Program, supervised by VLP Staff Attorney Roberta Scoll, assists hundreds of indigent and disabled men, women and children in housing court to prevent homelessness. Many of the cases are holdover or nonpayment matters. Most tenants appear pro se, and are severely disadvantaged by lack of counsel. The courts are overburdened trying to administer justice. Given the lack of affordable housing in this region, eviction may place families at a severe risk of becoming homeless.

This project allows attorneys to volunteer to represent these individuals for a four hour session once a week, a month or as frequently as they choose. This past year, Rich has actively represented 21 individuals or families, defending or forestalling evictions. The goal is to preserve housing or at least give the tenants sufficient time to secure alternative housing and avoid shelter placement or homelessness.

In nearly every matter, Rich has been able to dismiss the eviction or negotiate a stipulation of settlement which either provides for the client's tenancy to continue, or allows additional time for them to seek alternative housing for their families. This type of assistance involves direct advocacy and engagement with the local community. It is a way to empower others and help those who have no place else to go.

Rich graduated from Brooklyn Law School in 1974, after pursuing a Master's degree in Biology and a rewarding 11 year career teaching junior high school science. After his admission to the New York Bar in 1975, he immediately opened a private general practice, and ultimately focused on real estate and business transactions.

When asked about why he joined the VLP, Rich noted: "I simply wanted to give back. The clients I assist show me a different world. I am often amazed at how families can survive on the brink of homelessness. I enjoy helping these clients keep a roof over their children's heads."

Rich credits the work he has done in Landlord tenant Court with helping him gain valuable courtroom exposure. Most importantly, the experience helps "...sharpen my ability to think on my feet and come up with novel negotiating solutions. The key to success in law is the learned skill of analyzing a situation and negotiation."

Rich is cognizant that the VLP always needs more volunteers, and faithfully assists on at least two to three cases each month. "I never let lack of time be an excuse. I just make the time because I know how important this work is."

Roberta Scoll, Staff Attorney and coordinator of the Project, nominated Rich for the honor of Pro Bono Attorney of the Month for his determination to help clients as well as his long-standing dedication. She comments, "His ability to assist so many clients in landlord tenant cases is what contributes to the Project's continued success. We are so grateful to him and the many other generous attorneys who give of their time."

In addition to practicing law, Rich believes it is important to make the time to have other interests or activities to de-stress. Rich plays golf, devotes many hours a week working out and loves spending time with his wife, children and six grandchildren.

In light of his professionalism and dedication, we are proud to honor Michael Rich, Esq., as our most recent Pro Bono Attorney of the Month.

***The Volunteer Lawyers Project** is a joint effort of **Nassau Suffolk Law Services** and the **Nassau County Bar Association**, who, for many years, have joined resources toward the goal of providing free legal assistance to Nassau County residents who are dealing with economic hardship. **Nassau Suffolk Law Services** is a non profit civil legal services agency, receiving federal, state and local funding to provide free legal assistance to Long Islanders, primarily in the areas of benefits advocacy, homelessness prevention (foreclosure and eviction defense), access to health care, and services to special populations such as domestic violence victims, disabled, and adult home residents. The provision of free services is prioritized based on financial need and funding is often inadequate in these areas. Furthermore, there is no funding for the general provision of **matrimonial or bankruptcy representation**, therefore the demand for pro bono assistance is the greatest in these areas. If you would like to volunteer, please contact Susan Biller, Esq. 516-292-8100, ext. 3136.*