

Joe Surkiewicz – MLSC recognizes 2011 justice champions

by Joe Surkiewicz

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Two private attorneys — M. Natalie McSherry of Kramon & Graham and Mitchell Y. Mirviss of Venable — lead the list of honorees at next month's Maryland Legal Services Corp. annual awards reception.

The lawyers will share the Arthur W. Machen, Jr. Award, presented annually to an attorney who has rendered extraordinary service by providing civil legal services to the poor or by improving delivery systems that help them.

The recognition comes with clout: it's from MLSC, the state's primary funder to a wide array of programs that serve the civil legal needs of the poor and disadvantaged.

Mirviss has worked on child welfare poverty issues for more than 30 years — first as a staff attorney at Maryland Legal Aid and continuing at Venable LLP for more than 20 years now.

Since 1988, Mirviss has served pro bono as lead or co-counsel for the class of 4,000 Baltimore City children placed in the custody of the Baltimore City Department of Social Services in the federal class action, L.J. v. Massinga (now called L.J. v. Dallas).

Most recently, he argued successfully in the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to affirm the federal court's authority to enforce the federal child welfare laws.

"Mitch is an indefatigable advocate for children, working on many fronts to ensure that children and adolescents have access to the courts, their voices are heard in the legislature, and their well-being not lost in the labyrinth of public agencies charged with their protection," said William L. Grimm, senior attorney at National Center for Youth Law in Oakland, Calif., and a colleague of Mirviss' when both worked at Legal Aid.

Added Ward Coe of Gallagher Evelius & Jones LLP: "Mitch's dedication to the disadvantaged children of Maryland is unparalleled. The good that he has done for them can never be measured."

McSherry, who for more than 30 years has litigated health care issues and a variety of other matters, has also been an active pro bono volunteer and serves on the boards of Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service and other legal services programs.

"She has a great sense of humor and cares deeply about legal services," said Baltimore City Circuit Judge Pamela White. "She has always been a mover and a shaker. When push came to shove at the General Assembly about the court filing fee surcharge increase for legal services, she was totally pragmatic talking to legislators about how the rule of law could fall apart without additional support. She has the knack of being blunt without being harsh."

Debra Gardner, who will receive the Benjamin L. Cardin Distinguished Service Award, is the legal director of the Public Justice Center. The Cardin Award is presented annually to an outstanding public interest attorney regularly involved in providing, promoting or managing civil legal services to the poor.

Gardner, legal director of the PJC since 2000, has dedicated more than 25 years to legal services and has provided leadership in the right to counsel/civil Gideon efforts locally and nationally.

"She ... conveys to those she works with —every day in scores of ways — her deep dedication to making the rule of law a reality for the least advantaged of our fellow citizens," said former Maryland attorney general Stephen H. Sachs, who has worked with Gardner on civil Gideon cases.

"No young lawyer can leave Deb's tutelage without an increased commitment to serve the disadvantaged — and on not infrequent happy occasions knowing that his or her work, under Deb's supervision and with her guidance, has helped improve the lives of deserving clients," Sachs added.

This year's William L. Marbury Outstanding Advocate Award (for a non-attorney who helps low-income people) will be presented to Michelle Swift, pro bono program manager at MVLS.

During Swift's 11-year tenure, she has referred more than 5,000 low-income clients to volunteer attorneys in Maryland.

"I am constantly amazed at how much Michelle is able to juggle on a daily basis, and the relaxed and professional manner in which she accomplishes those tasks," said Caroline D. Ciruolo, an attorney with Rosenberg|Martin|Greenberg LLP who has worked with Swift in the MVLS' Low Income Taxpayer Clinic. "She views everything as a team effort, although she is always willing and able to carry an extra load. And she does so with a sincere passion for her work and the clients."

The Peoples Law Library will receive the Herbert S. Garten Public Citizen Award, which honors an entity or organization not regularly engaged in the delivery of legal services to low-income persons. The People's Law Library is an award-winning website that provides legal and self-help information on Maryland and federal law affecting low- and moderate-income Marylanders and their families.

Finally, the MLSC board is presenting an Award of Special Recognition to Janet Stidman Eveleth, the recently retired director of communications of the Maryland State Bar Association, for journalistic excellence in her coverage of legal services during her 24-year tenure.

The MLSC Annual Awards Reception is Monday, Dec. 5, from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at the Radisson Plaza Lord Baltimore's Calvert Ball Room, 20 W. Baltimore St. in Baltimore. Tickets are \$60 (\$40 for MLSC grantee staff and law students). To purchase tickets, go to http://mlsc.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Reply_11.pdf or call (410) 576-9494, ext. 1004.

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