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22nd Annual Justice Robert Benham Awards for Community Service

The Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism is pleased to recognize lawyers and judges who have made significant contributions to their communities and who demonstrate the positive contributions of members of the Bar beyond their legal or official work.

BY KARLISE Y. GRIER

The idea that community service is a component of professionalism has existed as long as the Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism (Commission) has existed. In a May 1989 article, former Supreme Court of Georgia Chief Justice Harold G. Clarke discussed the relationship between community service and professionalism as a debt that lawyers owed to society.¹ Justice Clarke posited, "Each lawyer owes a debt to the client, the law, the system of justice, fellow lawyers, and the public."² He then asserted, "The last and perhaps most important debt to be discussed is the one owed to the public. Professionalism burdens lawyers with a duty to serve and to lead. The grand tradition of the legal profession insists that lawyers not shrink from leadership roles. By nature and training, lawyers possess qualities which uniquely fit them for positions of leadership in both the public and private sector."³

On March 19, the Commission recognized those lawyers who in the grand tradition of the legal profession have offered themselves for service and leadership at the 22nd Annual Justice Robert Benham Awards for Community Service. Since 1998, the Commission has presented the

awards to honor lawyers and judges in Georgia who have made significant contributions to their communities and who demonstrate the positive contributions of members of the Bar beyond their legal or official work. Service may be made in any field, including but not limited to: social service, education, faith-based efforts, sports, recreation, the arts or politics. The selection committee generally believes that community or public service is not service to a bar association; however, community service can be done through bar-sponsored or related activities or projects.

Award Recognition

Awards are presented to selected attorneys in the judicial districts of Georgia from which nominations are received. The 2022 award recipients were Lindsay Beth Gardner, managing attorney, Georgia Bureau of Investigation, Marietta; Michael D. St. Amand, partner, Gray, Rust, St. Amand, Moffett & Brieske, LLP, Atlanta; and Paul E. Weathington, senior partner, Weathington, LLC, Atlanta.

The Lifetime Achievement Award—the highest recognition the Commission bestows—is reserved for a lawyer or judge

who, in addition to meeting the criteria for receiving the Justice Robert Benham Award for Community Service, has demonstrated an extraordinarily long and distinguished commitment to volunteer participation in the community throughout his or her legal career. The recipients of the 2022 Lifetime Achievement Award were Richard Gerakitis, partner, Troutman Pepper Hamilton Sanders LLP, Atlanta; and S. Wade Malone, partner, Nelson Mullins, Atlanta.

The awards ceremony, which was held at the Loudermilk Conference Center, was perhaps more special this year because it was the first time in two years that some people had been able to gather with others for such an event. During his remarks, Chief Justice David E. Nahmias observed, "A few days ago, on March 14, we marked the two-year anniversary of Gov. Kemp's declaration of the first-ever statewide Public Health Emergency and Chief Justice Melton's declaration of the first-ever Statewide Judicial Emergency Order. ... I don't think any of us imagined two years ago that we would still be dealing with so many consequences of this new disease. But I'm glad that we're now at a point



Justice Robert Benham,
Supreme Court of Georgia
1990-2020

PHOTO PROVIDED BY JOHN DISNEY, THE DAILY REPORT

where we can safely have gatherings like this one to celebrate together some of the best work that Georgia lawyers are doing in their communities.”

Chief Justice Nahmias also shared that over many years he had witnessed how individual lawyers could use their talents and energy to create tremendously positive impacts on their communities. He also noted that what made the five lawyers the Commission had recognized this year so special was the effect that their remarkable, dedicated and diverse service had on the lives of so many people outside their practices. Justice Shawn Ellen LaGrua who serves as an advisor to the Chief Justice’s Commission on Professionalism and Justice Verda M. Colvin, the most recent addition to the Court, also attended the awards ceremony.

The Commission was especially grateful that Justice Robert Benham, although retired, attended the ceremony with his wife, Nell. Before asking the crowd to stand to acknowledge Justice Benham, Chief Justice Nahmias said, “I wish every Georgia lawyer had the opportunity to learn about professionalism by working with and just watching Justice Benham as I did for more than a decade.”

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Front row (left to right): Karlise Y. Grier, executive director, Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism; Justice Robert Benham (retired), Supreme Court of Georgia; Chief Justice David E. Nahmias, Supreme Court of Georgia. Back row (left to right): Lindsay Beth Gardner; Justice Shawn Ellen LaGrua, Supreme Court of Georgia, accepting for Paul E. Weathington; Michael D. St. Amand; S. Wade Malone; and Richard Gerakitis.

Thanks and Appreciation

The awards ceremony was successful because of the hard work of many individuals whom I would like to thank. First, the Commission appreciates the work of the Benham Awards selection committee members who determined the award recipients. The members of the selection committee were Janet G. Watts, Watts & Watts, Jonesboro; Hon. Joshua Clark Bell, Bell/Payne, LLC, Whigham; John Michael Dugan, DRL Law LLC, Greensboro; Laverne Lewis Gaskins, Law Office of Laverne Lewis Gaskins, P.C., Augusta; Michael Hobbs, Troutman Pepper, Atlanta; Hon. Joy Lampley-Fortson, U.S. Department of Justice, Atlanta; Chung H. Lee, The Law Office of Lee & Associates PC, Duluth; William J. Liss, WXIA-TV/11Alive, Atlanta; Jennifer Mock, The Mock Law Firm, LLC, Statesboro; Hon. Herbert E. Phipps, Court of Appeals of Georgia (Retired), Albany; Cindy Wang, Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice, Decatur; Hon. Brenda Carol Youmas, Macon. In addition to the selection committee, several individuals volunteered to ensure the awards program was a success. Christopher J. Chan, partner, Eversheds Sutherland (US) LLP, and LaToya Sim-

one Williams, Houston Circuit Public Defenders Office, served as the co-chairs for the planning committee. Adwoa Ghartey-Tagoe Seymour, vice president of litigation, Albertsons Companies, Inc., was an advisor to the planning committee. Additionally, individuals who volunteered to assist during the evening of the awards ceremony were Christopher O. Brock, a 3L at the University of Georgia School of Law; Hon. Tabitha Ponder, judge, Magistrate Court of Cobb County; Samantha Beskin-Schemer, Beskin & Beskin, P.C.; and Paula Myrick, a legal professional in the metro-Atlanta community.

Commission Chair Chief Justice David E. Nahmias, Justice Shawn Ellen LaGrua and Justice Robert Benham provided guidance and leadership for the awards ceremony throughout the planning process. The Commission could not have hosted the awards ceremony without generosity of the 24 sponsors who supported the event. I am grateful that the members, advisors and liaisons of the Commission continue to understand the role and importance of the awards ceremony in the Commission's work to promote and enhance professionalism among Georgia's lawyers and judges.

Finally, I want to thank Commission staff members Cheyenne Scipio, administrative and communications specialist, and intern Jordyn Irons for providing staff support for the 22nd Annual Justice Robert Benham Awards for Community Service.

The program book and photographs from the ceremony are available at cjcpga.org/benhamcsa22/. ●



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Endnotes

1. See Harold G. Clarke, *Professionalism: Repaying the Debt*, 25 Ga. St. B. J. 170 (1989), <http://cjcpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/25-GSBJ-170-1989-Professionalism-Repaying-the-Debt-Harold-Clarke-ethics-minimum.pdf>.
2. *Id.*
3. *Id.* at 173.

Justice Robert Benham Award for Community Service: 2022 Honorees



Richard Gerakitis

Lifetime Achievement Award

Has served on the Board of Directors for the YMCA of Metro Atlanta (Metro Y) since the end of 2007; served as secretary of the Metro Y Operating Board since 2013 and served as secretary to the Executive Committee of the Operating Board since 2015.

Served twice as president in 1993-94 and again in 2012-13 of the Rotary Club of Atlanta West End; served on the Mercer School of Law Board of Visitors from 2012 to 2018; served on the Mercer University School of Law Alumni Association Board twice, from 1986-88 and again from 2005 to 2012; served as general counsel for the Christian Council of Metropolitan Atlanta from 1991 to 1994, and the Georgia State Golf Association from 2011 to 2014; served as chairman of the State Bar of Georgia Clients' Security Fund for five years.



S. Wade Malone

Lifetime Achievement Award

Created, in partnership with the Atlanta Bar Association, the Summer Law Internship Program (SLIP). Now 30 years later, this innovative program has provided more than 850 paid internships to Atlanta area high school students, provided rigorous legal education, and connected interns with life-

long mentors. Forty-five former Atlanta Bar Association Summer Law Interns have gone to law school. Seventeen former Interns are presently in law school. One former intern currently serves as a superior court judge. A second former intern currently serves as a district attorney. A third former intern currently serves as a regional director for the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.



Lindsay Beth Gardner

Fundraised for numerous Cobb County Bar Association's Younger Lawyers Division (Cobb YLD) fundraising events, including:

the Cobb YLD's March Madness event to benefit the Cobb Accountability Courts; the Cobb Bar's golf tournaments to benefit the Children's Emergency Fund; and the Cobb Bar's Sleighbells on the Square event. Choreographed routines and headlined performances for the Cobb YLD competitors in the Justice Jam lip sync competition benefiting the Cobb Legal Aid office, winning three years in a row; participated in Communities In Schools' Annual Adult Spelling Bee.



Michael D. St. Amand

Started a Cub Scout Pack in 2008 and led the pack until 2012. Has volunteered with Big Brothers/Big Sisters as a Big Brother since 1985.

Regularly visited children at Georgia Regional Hospital during the holiday season as part of the Atlanta Bar Association Santa Project. Volunteered as a food-rescue driver for Second Helpings for more than 15 years. Volunteered for Rick McDevitt Youth Center in Peoplestown and the Jerusalem House.



Paul E. Weathington

Has served for 12 years as the Team 6 Usher Captain for a 60+ member usher team; Serves as pro bono attorney for the American

Junior Golf Association and the Atlanta Junior Golf Association; emeritus member of the Touchdown Club of Atlanta Board of Directors; authored and published seven children's books and has visited preschools and elementary schools to read to children and emphasize the importance of reading and literacy.

**partial list of honoree accomplishments*