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From the President:
Addressing COVID-19
Impact on Civil Legal
Services

Transitioning into
Practicing Law Virtually

Member Benefits and
the COVID-19 Pandemic

2020 Fiction Competition
Winner: The Deal

THE LEGAL

An Overview of Ultimate Issue Evidence

21st 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, demonstrating the positive contributions of members of the Bar beyond their legal or official work.

BY KARLISE Y. GRIER

When you hear Justice Robert Benham (retired) speak about the involvement of lawyers and judges in community service, you immediately understand why he says he has “been rabid” about the topic. In his view, community service is a way of transforming how the public—and lawyers—views the role of lawyers in our society. In 2019, Justice Benham recalled that the Chief Justice’s Commission on Professionalism established the Awards for Community Service in his name because “we wanted the community to see lawyers as servants of the community. We’ve encouraged lawyers to become involved with the boy scouts, the girl scouts, the civic clubs, the business leagues, and become part and parcel of the community.” When lawyers become involved in their communities, Justice Benham believes they have a better feeling about the practice of law, and the community fosters a better feeling about lawyers.

Since 1998, the commission has presented the awards to honor Georgia lawyers and judges who have made significant contributions to their communities and demonstrate the positive contributions of members of the Bar beyond their legal or official work. The commission planned to continue its tradition of hon-

oring lawyers at the 21st Annual Justice Robert Benham Awards for Community Service ceremony on March 14 in Atlanta, an event that would give the legal community an opportunity to honor an exceptional group of lawyers and judges who volunteer in numerous ways in the community. Additionally, attendees were to hear Justice Benham speak following his retirement from the Supreme Court of Georgia on March 1, 2020, after 30 years of service. Unfortunately, due to the public health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the commission canceled the ceremony in order to ensure the health and safety of everyone involved. At the time of writing this article in April, a statewide shelter-in-place order was in effect, and it appeared likely that the order would be extended. Therefore, the commission had not yet discussed or made plans for a rescheduled awards ceremony.

Award Recognition

While we are currently unable to predict when a rescheduled awards ceremony will occur, the commission is moving forward with recognizing these individuals here so as to provide readers with uplifting and

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Justice Robert Benham,
Supreme Court of Georgia
1990-2020

PHOTO PROVIDED BY JOHN DISNEY, THE DAILY REPORT

positive news during this unprecedented time in our lives.

The recipients of the 2020 Justice Robert Benham Community Service District Awards are Donarell Rhea Green IV, Athens; Hon. Robert Dale Leonard II, Marietta; Rita C. Spalding, Brunswick; Jennifer Leigh Weizenecker, Atlanta; Connie L. Williford, Macon; and Sally Quillian Yates, Atlanta.

The Lifetime Achievement Award for Community Service recipients are Thomas William “Tommy” Malone (posthumously), Atlanta, and Jacqueline L. Payne, Marietta. The Lifetime Achievement Award is the highest recognition given by the commission and recognizes a lawyer or a judge who, in addition to meeting the general criteria for the Justice Robert Benham Award for Community Service, has also demonstrated an extraordinarily long and distinguished commitment to volunteer participation in the community throughout his or her legal career. Read more about these two honorees on page 70.

Thanks and Appreciation

Numerous members of the legal community, including judges, lawyers and legal professionals, volunteered their time and tal-

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Lifetime Achievement Award for Community Service



Nov. 2, 1942 - Oct. 1, 2019

Thomas William "Tommy" Malone was born and raised in Albany, Georgia. He was admitted to the Georgia Bar in 1965, prior to receiving his J.D. from Mercer University Walter F. George School of Law in 1966.

Malone was not only well regarded for his courtroom skills but also for the countless number of causes he supported with his generosity of time, talent and capital. Malone established several scholarships during his lifetime, including the Rosser Malone Endowed Scholarship in honor of his father, awarded to Mercer Law students with demonstrated financial need and

in good academic standing. He also established the Petrona Underwood Malone Scholarship Fund at Shorter College (Shorter University) in honor of his mother, which provides assistance to students who are in financial need.

Malone also supported the Shepherd Spine Center, now known as the Shepherd Center, and its foundation, on whose board of trustees he served for many years. Malone was also a long-time supporter of Mercer University, serving as a member of the University's Board of Trustees from 2006-17, which he chaired from 2015-17. In an interview with G. Steven Henry, Malone was once asked what his motto was, to which he responded, "There is no greater reward than being able to make a meaningful difference in the quality of life of another person." ●



Jacqueline L. "Jacki" Payne graduated from University of Georgia School of Law in 1980, and has spent almost all of her 38-year legal career as a lawyer for the Atlanta Legal Aid Society (ALAS). ALAS Executive Director Steve Gottlieb wrote about Payne: "One of Jacki's contributions to Atlanta Legal Aid was to help create the Kinship Care Project, which she now manages. This project helps grandparents and other relatives adopt children they are raising . . . Jacki recognized the need for this work after seeing the number of children being raised by grandparents and

other relatives after they had been abandoned, abused or orphaned by AIDS." ●

Payne has also spent most of her professional life serving others in her community. Her recent and ongoing service includes serving on the Board of the Innovative Solutions for Disadvantage and Disability; serving as a former president and board member of the Marietta Schools Foundation Board; co-founding and serving as a member of the 10 Women of Hope; and leading American Cancer Society walk teams. Payne is also currently active at the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation in Atlanta. In the past, Payne taught Sunday school; served as a Girl Scout leader; served on the PTA at several levels; and served on the Atlanta-Fulton Commission on Children and Youth. Payne genuinely enjoys serving others and is always looking for ways to help.

Marietta attorney Carlos Rodriguez's comment in a letter of support for Payne's nomination embodies one of the reasons Justice Benham initially wanted to establish the community service awards. Rodriguez observed: "Jacki has been an example and role model to me for how a lawyer with a servant's heart should meaningfully contribute to improving our community." ●

ent in advance of the awards ceremony as the commission worked to plan a uniquely special occasion. Those volunteers included members of the Benham Awards Selection Committee, chaired by Janet G. Watts; Volunteer Committee Co-Chairs Jena Emory and Paula Myrick; Fundraising Committee Co-Chairs Adwoa Seymour and R. Kyle Williams; and Visual Arts Committee Chair Vanessa Hickey Gales.

Attorney artists Phil Sandick, William Stiles and Hon. Phinia Aten had committed to display samples of their artwork at the awards ceremony. In addition, 2020 honoree Rita C. Spalding planned to display six posters of murals found throughout Brunswick. A small group of performers from the Atlanta Bar Association's Bard Show—Norman Barnett, Laurel R. Boatright, Abbey Martin and Kevin C. Wilson—were to provide entertainment during the ceremony. William J. "Bill" Liss, special assignment and consumer editor, WXIA-TV (NBC), had prepared for a fire-side chat with Justice Benham about public and community service. Hon. Chung Lee and the Korean American Saxophone Band were to play for the after-party. Approximately 50 additional lawyers and law students had volunteered their services. In addition, Chief Justice Harold D. Melton, commission chair, and Justice Sarah Hawkins Warren, commission advisor, provided guidance and leadership throughout the planning process, while the generosity of numerous sponsors (see page 69) helped ensure the event would be memorable. The commission remains deeply grateful to everyone who assisted in planning the awards ceremony.

In conclusion, I hope that once it is safe for Georgians to gather in community again, we can celebrate together—and in person—the service of the 2020 Benham Award honorees. The commission will post updates regarding any future plans for the awards ceremony at www.cjcpga.org. ●



Karlise Y. Grier

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Justice Robert Benham Award for Community Service: 2020 Honorees



Donarell Rhea Green IV

Partnered with the Athens YMCA for more than 12 years training young people to box; contributed to the Athens Tutorial Program and the Leaders as Readers program; member, Clarke County Mentor Board; member, Athens Child Development Board.



Jennifer Leigh Weizenecker

Member, Board of Directors for the Southeast Regional UNICEF USA; volunteer founder, UNICEF NextGen Atlanta; chair, NICEF Next-Gen Atlanta Steering Committee; volunteer lead counsel for two asylum merit hearings in 2019; volunteer teacher of pre-law classes at Georgia Tech.



Hon. Robert D. Leonard II

Chair, member, executive committee member, Tommy Nobis Center Board of Directors; mentor, Marietta Mentoring for Leadership; assistant coach, Cobb Youth Football League; head coach, Allatoona Youth Basketball League; Oregon Park Baseball Association Board member; participant in the Cobb County Superior Court's "Court 2 You" program.



Connie L. Williford

Founder, Mercer University School of Law, Women Law Students Annual Charity Gala and Auction; chairperson, Childhood Hunger Council for the Middle Georgia Community Food Bank; recipient, Legal Food Frenzy Award (2018-19); volunteer and pro bono counsel, Crisis Line & Safe House of Central Georgia; board member and executive committee member, Middle Georgia Access to Justice Project; volunteer, All About Animals.



Rita C. Spalding

Member, Steering Committee of Forward Brunswick; volunteer, Community Action Authority, assisting with Rise Risley, LLC; board member, Brunswick Downtown Development Authority; leader, Downtown Brunswick Mural Project; Lay Eucharistic Minister; mentor and coordinator for St. Mark's Episcopal Church's Education for Ministry program; volunteer, Safe Harbor Children's Center; former den leader, Boy Scout Troop 253; former regional coordinator, Georgia High School Mock Trial Competition.



Sally Quillian Yates

Co-chair, Board of Trustees of the Council on Criminal Justice; board member, Ethics & Compliance Initiative; board member, Project Healthy Minds; speaker on suicide prevention; established New Beginnings re-entry program; former coach, Georgia High School Mock Trial program; former volunteer, Everybody Wins Atlanta.

**partial list of honoree accomplishments*