

Legal Aid of Napa Valley

Last year, Carlos Moreno was on President Barack Obama's short list for possible nomination to the United States Supreme Court.

On Tuesday, Moreno was in a Coombsville wine cellar, lauding Napa attorneys who freely give their time to struggling citizens through Legal Aid of Napa Valley.

Moreno is a California Supreme Court justice best known for his dissent from the Court's 2009 decision to uphold Proposition 8, the ban on same-sex marriages.

As attorney Bob Arns who along with his wife, Ann, hosted Tuesday's event told the story, Moreno and New York judge Sonia Sotomayor were under close White House consideration for the High Court in May of 2009. White House officials interviewing Moreno asked if he was working on any politically sensitive cases that might affect his chances of confirmation by the U.S. Senate. Moreno let them know which way he planned to go on Proposition 8.

Shortly thereafter, Obama named Sotomayor to replace Justice David Souter.

Arns praised Moreno for placing "his convictions before politics" at that time. An emotional Arns also praised for Moreno for becoming a foster parent and guardian of a young woman, Moreno's niece, who has severe disabilities related to autism. Arns said that dedication was in the same spirit in which attorneys volunteer to handle Legal Aid cases for seniors, victims of domestic violence and others.

Moreno then spoke to 50 or so attorneys in attendance, emphasizing the importance of volunteerism in making sure that people gain equal justice under the law. While equal access to justice is the nation's goal, Moreno said, "I don't think any of us is naive enough to think it is the reality."

Moreno is the son of immigrants from Mexico who drove his father's produce delivery route in Los Angeles before attending Yale University and Stanford Law [School](#). George Deukmejian named him to serve as a judge in Los Angeles County in 1986, and 12 years later President Bill Clinton named him to the federal trial bench in Los Angeles. In 2001, Gov. Gray Davis tapped Moreno for the California Supreme Court.

Moreno said that without proper legal counsel, he would have had a difficult time adopting his niece, and that the need for dedicated volunteer lawyers spreads from traditional legal aid areas, criminal defense and poverty rights, to representing families with a child caught in the juvenile justice system.

Honoring locals

Legal Aid of Napa Valley, established in 1967, handles about 1,000 cases a year without charge to clients. It represents individuals in immigration and domestic violence cases as well as tenants facing eviction and other legal problems. Its small staff relies on private attorneys to offer their time pro bono — the Latin phrase meaning "for the public good" — to serve the needs of residents.

Tuesday was Legal Aid's first pro bono recognition gathering. It gave its first Justice Wes. H. Walker Pro Bono Award, named for the former Napa County Superior Court and California Court of Appeals jurist who passed away in October, to Napa attorney Phyllis Boyson.

In 2009, Boyson, who specializes in mediation and family law, volunteered more than 250 hours of her professional time the equivalent of more than six full-time work weeks to help Legal Aid clients.

"Phyllis is just extraordinary," Diana Dorame, executive director of Legal Aid of Napa Valley, said in an interview. "She helped everyone from seniors and veterans to navigating an inter-state child support case. She even appeared in court on Christmas Eve with a domestic violence victim who was afraid to appear alone."

Boyson was out of town and not at the gathering.

Legal Aid also recognized the contributions of three other local attorneys: Jean Barstow, **Teresa Cunningham** and Richard Day.

Dorame said Barstow is one of the "few attorneys in Napa County who speaks Spanish. We immediately think of her when we have a Spanish-speaking client with a landlord-tenant issue. She has gone above and beyond for these clients."

Cunningham, a partner with Napa's Gaw Van Male, was honored for being the most active attorney in assistance to Legal Aid among Napa's three largest law firms — Coombs & Dunlap; Dickenson, Peatman & Fogarty and Gaw Van Male.

"Teresa has handled the most cases out of the lawyers at any of the big law firms," said Dorame. "She's represented clients with labor law issues, restraining orders ... She never says 'no' to us."

Day is a bankruptcy specialist who has hosted free bankruptcy seminars and clinics since the economic downturn and has volunteered his time to steer several locals through the bankruptcy process. Dorame termed his efforts "extraordinary."