

PRESS RELEASE

Baker Donelson Recognizes Attorneys for Pro Bono Work

October 16, 2020

Baker Donelson has announced its annual Pro Bono Attorneys of the Year Awards, recognizing attorneys throughout the Firm for their pro bono work.

Baker Donelson's Pro Bono Shareholder [Samuel T. Bowman](#) said, "Baker Donelson has a storied history of leading the way to address the access to justice gap faced by so many in our country. These attorneys have all heeded the call and shown the same commitment to meet that need that our Firm has consistently demonstrated. We're proud to recognize their exemplary work and their spirit of service toward legal access and equity."

John G. Calender was named the firm-wide 2020 Baker Donelson Pro Bono Attorney of the Year. A shareholder in the Firm's Washington, D.C. office, [Mr. Calender](#) was recognized for his service as the primary counsel for the largest homeless shelter in Washington, D.C. Mr. Calender has spent hundreds of hours each year working with the shelter's resident leadership to protect the rights of the homeless. His work has included coordinating efforts with other advocacy groups; negotiating with government agencies, private interests, and the shelter's neighbors; and providing guidance for the shelter's leadership.

Baker Donelson also recognized attorneys in many of its individual offices for their pro bono efforts.

- Dylan W. Howard, Atlanta Pro Bono Attorney of the Year: [Mr. Howard](#) was involved in the representation of a Somali immigrant in an appeal of a deportation order to the Bureau of Immigration Appeals. The client, who had moved to the United States as a child and a refugee many years ago, was among the "Somali 92," 92 Somali deportees who were reportedly abused on an aborted U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement deportation flight. Mr. Howard, along with a large team of volunteers around the country representing other Somali deportees from the same flight, were recognized with the Advocates for Human Rights' 2019 Human Rights Volunteer Award and the American Immigration Lawyers Association's 2019 Arthur C. Helton Memorial Human Rights Award.
- Christopher Vitenas, Baton Rouge Pro Bono Attorney of the Year: [Mr. Vitenas](#) helped manage Baker Donelson's involvement in Louisiana's Access to Justice Program, which aims to develop the next generation of access to justice leaders through a focus on the civil legal needs of low-income individuals. Mr. Vitenas served as a mentor for four students, one from each law school in Louisiana, who were selected for the program. The goal of the program was to understand the challenging issues facing Louisiana's poor communities regarding access to legal assistance.
- Madeline Hughes, Birmingham Pro Bono Attorney of the Year: Ms. Hughes has been instrumental in numerous pro bono cases, including a First Amendment case and a Rule 32 death penalty case. Ms. Hughes was also part of a Baker Donelson team involved in the representation of the U.S. Conference of Mayors and three statewide organizations in filing an amicus brief in a lawsuit seeking ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.

- Susan Mathews, Houston Pro Bono Attorney of the Year: [Ms. Mathews](#) has assisted with pro bono projects for an organization that provides parenting classes to at-risk families. She has served on the board of directors as its legal counsel for five years and has consistently been a go-to resource for this organization on projects such as contract negotiations for the purchase and later the sale of their building. She has also handled general corporate and employment matters for the organization and advised the board when the organization had to suspend parenting classes due to financial conditions which were exacerbated by COVID-19.
- Mark M. Mercante, Mandeville Pro Bono Attorney of the Year: [Mr. Mercante](#), whose practice is focused on construction law, offered construction contracting advice to a number of nonprofit institutions serving indigent and underserved communities, including the design and construction of Dowdell House in the Faubourg Tremé neighborhood of New Orleans. When completed, Dowdell House will serve as a community center, creating space for after school programs to teach at-risk youth, partnering with Sylvan Learning Center.
- Lacey Rochester, New Orleans Pro Bono Attorney of the Year: [Ms. Rochester](#) has devoted a substantial amount of time toward work for the New Orleans Pro Bono Project, a non-profit that helps low-income families, individuals and the elderly in need gain access to lawyers who can help them resolve civil legal issues. She has been a member of the organization's board of directors since 2018, and currently co-chairs its annual fundraiser, the Justice for All Ball. She has also taken on pro bono cases in a variety of areas including transgender rights, construction fraud, and interdiction issues.
- Christie Hayes, Tri-Cities (Tennessee) Pro Bono Attorney of the Year: [Ms. Hayes](#), who consistently logs more than 100 hours of pro bono work annually, was recognized this year for her role as lead counsel in the adoption of a child from an assignment obtained from Legal Aid and for her service with the local advisory board for the Salvation Army.

Through its commitment to [pro bono representation](#), Baker Donelson provides legal services to groups and individuals whose resources are limited. For decades, the Firm's attorneys have provided a variety of counsel to many underserved populations that have had no options for legal representation. Baker Donelson's efforts include work on a wide range of matters, such as advocating for the homeless and organizations that serve the homeless, providing corporate legal services to non-profit organizations, collaborating with our clients to address particular community needs, and much more. The Firm has been instrumental in efforts such as expanding the Homeless Experience Legal Protection (HELP) program across the Southeast; creating courts dedicated to handling minor legal matters common among the homeless; assisting persons of limited means with obtaining driver's licenses, an essential need in helping these individuals reintegrate into society; and spearheading and organizing volunteer lawyer programs across Baker Donelson's footprint.

Baker Donelson has led the way in the legal industry by being one of the first law firms in the Southeast to create a Pro Bono Committee and designate a Pro Bono Shareholder. To further its commitment to pro bono, Baker Donelson also designates Pro Bono Committee Office Chairs in most of its 21 offices. These chairs are best suited to address local needs while coordinating with the Firm's Pro Bono Shareholder for global pro bono initiatives. This structure ensures Baker Donelson is well-suited to further its goal of addressing broad spectrum needs across the Firm's footprint and beyond.