

# AWARD RECIPIENT STATEMENT

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## LESLIE S. SILVERSTEIN



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I would like to sincerely thank the Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service for selecting me, as well as congratulate the other recipients. As pro bono lawyers, we don't think in terms of awards, but I must admit it is a lovely surprise.

I didn't come charging out of law school ready to save the world. It is more accurate to say it crept up on me. I began my practice representing individuals: a divorce client, a debtor in a bankruptcy, someone hurt on the job. For the past 26 years I have either practiced in very small firms, or on my own. Throughout my career I have seen countless examples of folks who simply needed a voice when their own was not being heard.

My pro bono work began in earnest about 8 years ago. I was volunteering on a domestic violence hotline run by Family Crisis Services in Portland. One particular call haunts me to this day.

The caller was a young mother married to a law enforcement officer. The callers are usually anonymous, and can decide how much information they wish to reveal. It became quickly apparent that this woman was in serious danger. Her husband had beat her severely many times. He had thrown her down the stairs, trapped her in a room for an extended period of time, and broken her jaw on one occasion. She was new to Maine, and had no friends or family in the area. He controlled all their finances, and kept her isolated. Back before such devices were commonplace, he had a GPS installed in her car, and constantly monitored her movements. Several times she had called the police, who had arrived at her home only to make a cursory investigation, and shake hands with her husband on their way out. I tried to persuade her to come to the shelter with her baby. She was too scared, and during the call, abruptly hung up. After speaking to the crisis workers afterwards, I learned she had called several times previously, each time desperate for help. I don't believe Family Crisis ever heard from her again. They told me unfortunately this was all too common.

I realized I had to do more than work the hotline. In 2007 I began handling protection from abuse cases in the Portland District Court as part of the Volunteer Lawyer's Project, working in conjunction with advocates from Family Crisis Services. The project provides free legal representation to victims of domestic violence, many of whom appear in court frightened and alone. These cases are heard every Friday, and regrettably the docket is very busy.

The other part of my pro bono work is handling political asylum cases. Several years ago, I read a book called *Little Bee* by Chris Cleave. It is both harrowing and uplifting. Without giving the plot away, it is about a young Nigerian girl who had endured unimaginable trauma. At the start of the book she is in a detention center in England, imagining the various ways she could kill herself. When I finished the book, I read an interview with Mr. Cleave in which he said something like: "these individuals are not criminals, they just want the same freedoms we all have - to have them imprisoned is an outrage". I looked to see if there were any asylum seekers in Maine. I immediately found the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project's (ILAP's) website, and saw there was a pro bono panel of lawyers that handled asylum cases.

ILAP, like the Maine VLP, is an exceptional legal services organization that provides free or low cost legal services to disadvantaged Mainers. I signed up for the pro bono panel, and began researching (some might say obsessively). I attended a training session, and got my first case in early 2011. Given the huge backlogs in our immigration system, it should come as no surprise to learn this case is still pending today.

This first case involved an African woman who had escaped horrific torture, death threats, and persecution for her work helping rape victims. She was forced to flee for her life, and leave her children and husband behind. My favorite day as a lawyer in almost 25 years of practice did not take place in a courtroom but in an airport watching my client's four young children come through International Arrivals. She had not seen them in almost two and a half years. She is the bravest woman I know.

I would like to profoundly thank Justice Andrew Mead, Ms. Diana Scully, Juliet Holmes-Smith, Esq., Sue Roche, Esq., and Jennifer Archer, Esq. for nominating/sending letters of support. I had no idea! This is a remarkable group of individuals; I am truly honored. Each one of them has a startling intellect wrapped in a powerful heart.

Pro bono clients have said to me: "Leslie, you have changed my life". But the truth is they have changed mine.