

Giving Back for Each and Every Victory: New Jersey Honors Hero for Exceptional Community Service

By Jaime Ackerman

So often as lawyers our focus is drawn to generating new work, billable hours and million dollar results for our clients. At some firms, we have quotas to fill for bar activities, professional development, and continuing legal education credits. Although all these facets of our professional lives are important, equally as significant, and unfortunately sometimes overlooked, is the time we spend giving back to the community. These charitable efforts are to be commended. They are as worthy of recognition and praise from our partners and peers as an attorney's successful trial victory.

Recognizing Service to the Community

Each year at the New Jersey State Bar Association's annual meeting and convention, the Young Lawyers Division presents a young lawyer with the "Service to the Community Award." The Awards Committee solicits recommendations from the bar for individuals who have displayed outstanding service to their communities. The Award takes into account not only the nature of the charitable works performed during the course of the year, but also a broader historical record of the person's commitment to community service. This year the Award went to Jonas Seigel, who has truly made service to the community a way of life.

Giving Back

From an early age, Seigel's parents stressed the importance of being grateful for what they had and giving back. Growing up, he volunteered with food drives and coached kids' sports teams. Seigel was in law school when hurricane Katrina struck. In the aftermath of Katrina, people around the country showed their support for the victims in different ways. Although many were satisfied sending a check for the relief efforts or donating old clothes for the people who had lost everything, Seigel needed to do something more.

Taking a term off from law school, he drove from Michigan to New Orleans to help Habitat for Humanity rebuild the city. Although he had never worked in construction or picked up a hammer, he thought, "I can do something. I can build. I can help." Seigel spent four months in New Orleans constructing new homes for Katrina survivors. Being able to give these people new lives and a fresh start was important to him.

Seigel felt blessed just being a part of it. He described the experience of seeing firsthand how tragedy brings people together and the results that come from all types of people coming together for a common purpose as beautiful.

He returned from New Orleans, finished law school, passed the bar, and began working in northern New Jersey for the Seigel Law Firm, a four-attorney personal injury law firm in Ridgewood. In that part of the state, the local community is diverse, spanning upscale mansions to rundown urban areas and everything in between. Seigel observed that it was a real struggle for some of his clients to even come in to his office for appointments. It did not take long for him to see the needs of his clients and the area.

A Real Impact

Seigel knew that his firm could make a real impact on the lives of the people in the local community. He formed the Seigel Law Firm Charity Fund as a nonprofit organization for his office. The law firm has agreed to donate \$100 from every case it successfully resolves, either through a settlement or verdict, to the Seigel Law Firm Charity Fund. At the end of 2009, the Fund will donate approximately \$15,000 to \$20,000 to local charities so as to affect as many of the

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firm's clients as possible. This is the first year of the Charity Fund, and Seigel anxiously looks forward to making the first of many donations and seeing how these efforts help those around him.

This concept is creative, yet beautiful in its simplicity. Anyone, any law firm, regardless of its size, from the largest mega firm to a solo practitioner, could set aside a small amount of money at a time. Over the course of the year, that money would grow substantially. By year's end, a significant pool of funds could be set aside, and it could make a real impact on the community or to a needy family. Seigel hopes that this concept is adopted by others so they too can give back in their own ways.

The NJ YLD also presents awards each year for Service to the Bar, Professional Achievement, and Young Lawyer of the Year. This year's awards winners were Christina Vassiliou, Jonathan Lomurro, and Amy Sara Cores, respectively.

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