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### Public Interest

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## Public Interest Law Day And Awards Ceremony

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The Public Interest Section of the Philadelphia Bar Association will kick off the 2006 holiday season with an exciting CLE, known as "Public Interest Law Day." The section's Delivery of Legal Services Committee is once again sponsoring the full-day CLE on Dec. 6. The CLE will focus on new ethics rules, advanced litigation skills and "hot topic" updates in housing, immigration and client relations, among others. The day will be capped with a special cocktail reception and awards ceremony at the Loews Philadelphia Hotel, where the Public Interest Section will celebrate its 15th anniversary.

It's been a landmark year so far for the section, commonly referred to as the "conscience of the bar association." This year has been filled with eye-opening resolutions, record-setting attendance and unprecedented fund raising. The annual cocktail reception will continue its tradition of celebrating the activities of public interest lawyers and honoring the 2006 recipient of the Andrew Hamilton Award, Thomas Gilhool of the Public Interest Law Center in Philadelphia, for distinguished public service advocacy.

Gilhool is retiring after a distinguished 41-year career as a public interest lawyer. His contributions to the law and his impact on the lives of many are incalculable, but Gilhool has made an impact through educating of persons with disabilities; freeing persons with disabilities from institutional confinement; strengthening community services available for persons with disabilities; developing new service groups to enforce provisions that ensure children's health care; and defending against the new federalism that emanated as the judicial landscape evolved.

The awards ceremony will also continue its tradition of awarding the annual Judge A. Leon Higginbotham Scholarship. This \$4,000 scholarship is randomly awarded to a public interest organization to enable it to hire a law student for the following summer.

The Public Interest Section, founded in 1991, provides a forum for public interest and private lawyers to come together on behalf of Philadelphia's neediest community. In 1994, the bar association bylaws charged the newly created section with "promoting the interests of the members who address the legal needs and rights of the poor, minorities, victims of abuse, persons with disabilities, the homeless and other disadvantaged populations." The section, as it did in its infancy, continues to provide a forum for the bar to work together on issues of mutual concern that affect the public interest and to educate and involve the entire bar in issues affecting the public interest.

Now, with almost 500 members consisting of public interest and private lawyers, law school faculty members, foundation directors and law students, the mission of improving the delivery of legal services to Philadelphia's poorest community is thriving. Such collaboration not only vastly improves the delivery of legal services, but also

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has created a culture of inclusion within the Philadelphia Bar Association regarding issues that affect and concern the poor. The Public Interest Section epitomizes the fulfillment of the bar association's mission to serve both the profession and the public by promoting equal access to justice, professional excellence and respect for the rule of law.

To that end, the section will also be awarding its first annual Law Student Award at its Dec. 6 annual reception. The Law Student Award will recognize one third-year law student with a demonstrated commitment to public service from each of the five Philadelphia area law schools. The award is a creation of the section's Law School Outreach Committee, chaired by Sara Woods from Villanova University School of Law. The Law School Outreach Committee provides educational programs, pro bono opportunities and networking events for law students with the goal of encouraging future lawyers to consider public service as a career choice.

While the Philadelphia Bar Association has always shown strong support for public-interest lawyers, this has been a particularly special year. At the beginning of his tenure as bar association chancellor, Alan M. Feldman challenged the legal community to increase its giving to help better support the legal services agencies that provide assistance to those who cannot afford it. In launching "The Raise the Bar" campaign, Feldman was able to encourage 125 firms to donate nearly \$1.5 million to public interest legal organizations and the Philadelphia Bar Foundation. More than 23 of the 25 largest law firms participated in the campaign, and many more small and medium firms, plus solo practitioners, also took part. These additional monies will help agencies increase outreach efforts, direct legal services, and educational opportunities.

In recognition of his Herculean efforts in "raising the bar" and setting the benchmark for the entire legal community, the section will be honoring Feldman, as well as recognizing other campaign leaders, at the Dec. 6 awards ceremony. These awards are a small token of the debt of gratitude owed Feldman, as well as Philadelphia Bar Foundation president Bob Lane and bar foundation Executive Director Maureen Mingey, as well as campaign co-chairs Wendy Beetlestone and Kathleen D. Wilkinson. Their combined efforts have improved the lives of those less fortunate and in need of legal assistance.

In another unprecedented move, the Public Interest Section has dramatically increased its fundraising in the past year by almost 150 percent, thanks to pledge commitments secured by former chancellor Edward Chacker. The increased funding will allow the section to consider options such as funding additional summer scholarships, increasing the amount of the scholarships, and subsidizing CLE costs for public interest and government lawyers. This success is a real tribute to the hard work of its committee chairs and at-large representatives, who have worked tirelessly on behalf of the section over the past year.

And as if this wasn't enough, the Public Interest Section's Committee on the Legal Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in conjunction with the bar association, established a fund to reimburse attorneys who pay for sign language interpreters to communicate with clients or potential clients who are deaf or hard of hearing. This measure will encourage small firms, solo practitioners, public interest firms and pro bono volunteers to comply with their federal obligations and increase access for people who are deaf or heard of hearing to legal services.

Similarly, the Public Interest Section supported a resolution raising the income-eligibility limit to qualify for reduced cost legal services through the bar association's "low-fee plan" to 250 percent of the official poverty threshold. The low-fee plan serves as a legal safety net for low-income persons who do not meet the income qualifications for legal aid, by matching clients with lawyers willing to handle limited scope and non-fee-generating matters for a significantly reduced legal fee.

As you can see, it's been a busy year indeed for Philadelphia's public interest lawyers and the leadership within the bar association's Public Interest Section. Here's hoping that the success of 2006 carries over to 2007.

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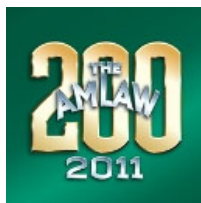
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