

Nassau Suffolk Law Services
Volunteer Lawyers Project
Pro Bono Attorney of the Month
Michael Schmitt

Submitted by

Susan G. Biller, Esq.

The Nassau Suffolk Law Services' Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP) and the Nassau County Bar Association are delighted to recognize Michael Schmitt as Pro Bono Attorney of the Month. This month's award honors Mr. Schmitt for his strong passion and commitment to indigent Nassau County residents by providing them with pro bono legal counsel. Based in Sea Cliff, he is a lawyer who truly cares about his clients and the communities in which they live. Mr. Schmitt began volunteering with the VLP in 2009, handling mostly matrimonial cases. Since that time, Mr. Schmitt has consistently maintained a steady caseload with the VLP, working rigorously to provide legal services to those in need.

Mr. Schmitt's diversified educational background has proved valuable in allowing him to handle various types of cases. He received his Bachelor's degree in Physics at SUNY-Buffalo and then an MBA in finance from St. Johns University. He earned his law degree at Hofstra University in 2008. After law school, Mr. Schmitt started working part-time on various types of cases, ranging from divorce, immigration, securities fraud, pro bono bankruptcy, and foreclosure issues. In particular, he is very happy he was able to assist several individuals become American citizens. Today, Mr. Schmitt's practice

focuses primarily on child advocacy cases, especially those which involve special needs children.

Susan Biller, Pro Bono Coordinator of the VLP states: “Mike is one of a select group of attorneys we know we can count on to handle a challenging or contentious case. Our program relies on attorneys like him; we are extremely grateful for his commitment.”

One of Mr. Schmitt’s most rewarding volunteer experiences at the VLP involved one of his earlier matrimonial cases, which was complicated by domestic violence. His client, the wife, was physically and emotionally abused by her controlling spouse. Eventually, she was thrown out of her home, leaving her with nowhere to turn. Mr. Schmitt was very moved and delighted to help improve her desperate situation. Through his excellent legal representation, Mr. Schmitt was also able help mitigate the psychological, emotional, and physical pain that his client had been enduring. The client was so appreciative and grateful to finally be able to move on with her life. Since that case, Mr. Schmitt has enhanced the lives of dozens of others through his hard work, passion, and dedication.

Mr. Schmitt hopes that cases like this will encourage lawyers to engage in more pro bono work in the future. “Attorneys should embrace the opportunity to enhance their skills by assisting in some areas they may otherwise not experience.” He recognizes that most needy clients lead challenging lives, and would never be able navigate our legal system without the help of pro bono counsel. Mr. Schmitt understands he has a responsibility to provide assistance to them. He explains, “lawyers are often portrayed as greedy and selfish, taking advantage of the anger and fear of their clients. But *pro*

bono attorneys do exactly the opposite because they help people instead of taking advantage of them, providing satisfaction to both parties.”

Mr. Schmitt claims that obtaining practical hands-on experience has been one of the most significant factors contributing to his success as an attorney. The practice of law was not exactly as he had envisioned in law school; it took some time to learn the ins and outs of practice. He places a strong importance on maintaining the right mindset when it comes to legal duties.

With experience, Mr. Schmitt asserts that an attorney can develop a more realistic perspective of how the legal system works. For example, with divorce and child custody cases, keeping a pragmatic mindset can sometimes be better than being overly optimistic. He states, “Things don’t work out perfectly in the real world. It’s great to help people, but sometimes the system doesn’t grant them everything they hope for. Being pragmatic enables you to be a better lawyer because it can permit you to give clients the proper guidance and prepare them for a realistic outcome. Experience also allows you to gain exposure to many types of attorneys and observe their strategies—it’s key to learn which strategies best help certain clients and to know what to expect from your adversaries.”

In addition to his legal work, Mr. Schmitt is an avid traveler and ardently enjoys music. However, his most substantial, influential, and valuable passion, by far, is his four year old daughter, who is “the center of his life.” She has inspired him to also direct his attention to special needs advocacy and children’s services.

On behalf of the Volunteer Lawyers Project and the Nassau County Bar Association, we congratulate Michael Schmitt on this achievement. We are confident that

he will continue to help needy clients with his extraordinary passion, dedication, and determination. His altruism and eagerness to help others makes us proud to name Michael Schmitt the *Pro Bono* Attorney of the Month.

By Ryan B. Salzman, Intern

THE VOLUNTEER LAWYERS PROJECT IS A JOINT EFFORT OF NASSAU SUFFOLK LAW SERVICES AND THE NASSAU COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION, WHO FOR MANY YEARS, HAVE JOINED RESOURCES TOWARD THE GOAL OF PROVIDING FREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE TO NASSAU COUNTY RESIDENTS WHO ARE DEALING WITH ECONOMIC HARDSHIP. NASSAU SUFFOLK LAW SERVICES IS A NON PROFIT CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES AGENCY, RECEIVING FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL FUNDING TO PROVIDE FREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE TO LONG ISLANDERS, PRIMARILY IN THE AREA OF BENEFITS ADVOCACY, HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION (FORECLOSURE AND EVICTION DEFENSE), ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE, AND SERVICES TO SPECIAL POPULATIONS SUCH AS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS, DISABLED, AND ADULT HOME RESIDENTS. THE PROVISION OF FREE SERVICES IS PRIORITIZED BASED ON FINANCIAL NEED AND FUNDING IS OFTEN INADEQUATE IN THESE AREAS. FURTHERMORE, THERE IS NO FUNDING FOR THE GENERAL PROVISION OF MATRIMONIAL OR BANKRUPTCY REPRESENTATION, THEREFORE THE DEMAND FOR PRO BONO ASSISTANCE IS THE GREATEST IN THESE AREAS. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO VOLUNTEER, PLEASE CONTACT SUSAN BILLER, Esq. 1(516)-292-8100, EXT. 3136.