

Introduction to Pro Bono Scholars Seminar

Videotaped remarks -- January 17, 2017

Greetings. I'm Chief Judge Janet DiFiore, and I'm so pleased to welcome you to today's seminar for Pro Bono Scholars.

Let me start by congratulating you on completing the bar exam. Now that you have gotten through that rite of passage, I hope that you are looking forward to the next phase of your law school career.

As a Pro Bono Scholar, you will be making an important difference in the lives of people in need. The work you will be doing over the next 12 weeks is part of a larger movement to close the access to justice gap in our State. New York, like the rest of the country, faces an ongoing crisis in ensuring access to justice for people who are unable to afford legal

representation. Each year, almost two million people come into our state courts without a lawyer. Many of these people are fighting for the basic necessities of life, -- like keeping a roof over their heads. Without the assistance of trained legal professionals, it can be extremely difficult for them to assert their legal rights effectively.

The impact of the justice gap extends beyond the litigants themselves and affects the entire legal system: more time is required of judges and court staff to deal with unrepresented litigants; adjournments are more frequent; and opposing parties represented by counsel may face higher litigation costs.

As Pro Bono Scholars, you will be using the skills and knowledge you gained in law school over the last two and a half years to help low-income New Yorkers with their real-life legal problems. The hands-on legal

experience you will gain this semester will serve you well in your careers. It will give you opportunities to build your professional reputation, and to form important relationships with practicing lawyers.

In a few short months, you will be entering a profession with a long and noble tradition of service to others. With the great privilege of practicing law, comes the responsibility of ensuring that our justice system is equally accessible to all people, rich and poor alike.

I hope that you will emerge from the Pro Bono Scholars with a greater sense of the obligation that lawyers have to improve the quality of justice in our communities, and with the kind of personal and professional fulfillment that comes from being of service to others.

Whatever you choose to do with your law degree, whatever kind of practice you choose to pursue, I hope that you will always make pro bono service a high priority in your personal and professional lives.

I wish you the very best of luck this Spring as a Pro Bono Scholar,-- and in your careers as lawyers. On behalf of the entire New York State justice system, I thank you for your valuable service and contributions.