

2013 John Adams and John Quincy Adams  
Pro Bono Publico Awards

**Short Introduction**

Gandhi once said, "The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world's problems." We are here today to honor those who have worked tirelessly to make our system of justice accessible to the most vulnerable among us, who have by their example demonstrated what can be accomplished by those who do what they are capable of doing.

**Verrill Dana, LLP and Victoria Rothbaum**

Just last year, Victoria Rothbaum, a long-time volunteer with Senior Partners for Justice, met with Verrill Dana attorneys Regina Hurley and Robin Murphy and the judges of the Suffolk Probate and Family Court to discuss how the legal system could better serve unrepresented litigants in the midst of a divorce. What emerged from their discussion is somewhat ironic: it was not the hotly contested divorce cases, the so-called "War of the Roses," that were clogging the

court's docket but the sheer number of "uncontested" divorce cases, where the divorcing parties wished to reach an agreement and avoid going to trial but had yet to be able to do so. When these litigants arrived on their scheduled day in court, they were often unable to resolve even preliminary matters because of procedural defects or inadequate paperwork. With 35 to 40 uncontested divorce cases scheduled on a given day, and over 80 percent of litigants appearing pro se, many of them limited in their ability to speak, write, and read English, the court lacked the time and resources to fully explain the issues or chart a course toward resolution. Instead, confusion ran high and frustration even higher. After this cycle repeated itself several times in some cases, litigants understandably felt that the legal system was failing them.

Victoria and the Verrill Dana team set out to break this cycle by creating a conciliation program known as the Settlement and Early Resolution Volunteer project,

or SERV. Instead of fending for themselves, often in frustration, litigants in uncontested divorce matters are now commonly referred to SERV. At conciliation, volunteer attorneys take the time to explain tricky issues, correct procedural defects, and help move the process toward a mutually-beneficial result. In the words of the court's case manager, cases often go to SERV "on the verge of collapse" but emerge fully-settled. In one recent case, the parties were headed toward a full trial. After 2.5 hours with the SERV attorneys, the parties realized they were in agreement and judgment entered.

Regina insists that there is no secret sauce or "Magic Bullet" to bring these parties to resolution; rather, she says "it's simply a matter of taking the time to explain the process, solving problems that arise, and making sure the parties don't get lost in the system." I think each of us can appreciate how much time, care, and effort goes in to reaching a

settlement in these disputes, particularly where there are such personal matters at stake.

Under Vickie, Regina and Robin's leadership, the results have been astounding. Since its launch in April 2012, SERV has resolved over 95 percent of cases sent its way, which amounts to well over 300 cases in total. Not only has SERV brought tremendous relief to the Probate and Family Court, it has been a huge benefit to indigent litigants. Rather than being forced to miss days of work without pay or arrange costly child care, SERV has enabled uncontested parties to resolve their cases efficiently and effectively. And thanks to the determined efforts of Vickie, Robin and Regina, SERV has recruited over 50 volunteer attorneys to participate, assuring that the program will continue to help indigent litigants access the legal system more effectively for years to come.

On behalf of the Probate and Family Court, and indeed the entire judicial branch, thank you Vickie, Regina, Robin, and Verrill Dana for devoting so much of

your time and considerable talent to ensure the legal system works for all.