

# President's Pro Bono Service Awards honor law firms, individual lawyers

**A** coalition of lawyers from northern and southern California spent thousands of hours on winning a statewide class action lawsuit that protects schoolchildren's fundamental right to equal educational opportunity. Another group of attorneys managed to prevent closure of a Los Angeles rehabilitation hospital that serves nearly 10,000 people with disabilities each year. And a lawyer in a two-person firm mentors law students who intern at a workers' rights clinic.

These are just a few of the attorneys honored last month with the 2005 State Bar President's Pro Bono Service Award. Created in 1983, the award is presented annually to California attorneys and law firms credited with making significant contributions in pro bono legal services to those with little income, as well as to organizations that serve the poor.

They come from small, medium-sized and large law firms. There is a newly admitted attorney, a retired public defender and a family law facilitator for a superior court. Their legal specialties differ, but all have found ways of helping impoverished Californians in need.

The awards, said former bar President John Van de Kamp, represent the good done by lawyers that too often goes unrecognized. "The recipients are standouts who we honor for their dedication to the needs of the less fortunate in our society," said Van de Kamp.

"Pro bono work is one of the most important things we can do to supplement the legal aid programs. Not only does it provide great assistance to people, but it is very satisfying for lawyers. We simply need to do more of it."

The 2005 award recipients are:



**Kirkland & Ellis Rancho Litigation Team**  
(L-R) Felix Lebron, Christopher Heck, Jeffrey Davidson, Valerie Hung and Tony Richardson

## LARGE FIRM

When the County of Los Angeles threatened to close the area's only rehabilitation hospital serving low-income people with disabilities, attorneys in the Los Angeles law firm of **KIRKLAND & ELLIS** sprang into action.

Joining the Western Law Center for Disability Rights, Western Center on Law & Poverty, Protection and Advocacy Inc. and National Senior Citizens' Law Center, Kirkland & Ellis attorneys Jeffrey Davidson, Tony Richardson, Joseph Graham Jr., Christopher Heck, Eve Crowell and Stephen McClain donated hundreds of hours of their time and expertise to making sure that plaintiffs like Antonio Gaxiola, who has muscular dystrophy, and Susan Rodde, who has cerebral palsy, quadriplegia, scoliosis and leaking heart valves, could live as productive lives as possible.

They argued that closing Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Hospital would violate the county's obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act because the facility is the only one in Los Angeles County to provide rehabilitation services to Medi-Cal recipients dealing with spinal cord injuries, strokes, traumatic brain injuries, post-polio syn-

drome, limb amputation, diabetes and arthritis.

"These services often mean the difference between life and death or between life in the community and life in a nursing home," according to the Western Law Center for Disability Rights.

An injunction preventing closure was issued by U.S. District Court Judge Florence Marie Cooper, and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the decision when it was appealed by the county. Not only were services for Rancho patients saved, precedent was established for other communities with disabled individuals.

"I cannot imagine a law firm more deserving of this prestigious award," said Pegine E. Grayson, executive director of the Western Center on Law & Poverty. "Legal services (direct and support) programs could not function nearly as effectively [as] we do without the support of local law firms. Kirkland & Ellis is in a class by itself in this regard."