

The Third Annual



ANGEL AWARDS

THE STATE'S OUTSTANDING PRO BONO LAWYERS

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his year we recognize 16 lawyers throughout California for their deep commitment to pro bono work, fighting for the rights of the most vulnerable—from Latino voters in Modesto to garment workers in Los Angeles. Lawyers can't apply for this award. Instead, we select winners based on our own reporting, and from nominations submitted by nonprofit organizations statewide. Whether they are sole practitioners, small-firm attorneys, corporate counsel, or big-firm lawyers, all are doing volunteer work that is essential to their clients' interests. The Angel Awards are our way of thanking them for their service.

—the editors of California Lawyer

Judith Z. Gold

HELLER EHRMAN, SAN FRANCISCO

Gold was a key member of the litigation team that helped The Public Interest Law Project (PILP) in Oakland block a reduction in welfare benefits. Under the stricter eligibility requirements proposed by the Alameda County Social Services Agency earlier this year, at least 5,000 of the county's 8,500 welfare recipients stood to lose all their benefits. PILP Co-Director Stephen E. Ronfeldt contacted Gold, and within a few days they were "working late at night and on weekends, emailing each other at 3 a.m." about the case, says Ronfeldt. "She put in well over 500 hours. This is probably the best pro bono help I've had in 40 years." Indeed, Alameda County Superior Court Judge David E. Hunter struck down the county's proposed changes, and the welfare benefits were retained (*Watkins v. County of Alameda*). Next month Gold joins PILP as its public benefits attorney.



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—STEPHEN E. RONFELDT, THE PUBLIC INTEREST LAW PROJECT—

want the father to be granted visitation rights, on the ground that the four-year-old boy had allegedly been conceived as a result of the father raping her. "A few days after I asked her, Michelene agreed to work pro bono on the case," says Lynch. Her client, a Jehovah's Witness, alleged that in meetings with church elders the biological father had admitted that he raped her. The trial court ruled that clergy-penitent privilege would apply, thus barring discovery of the crucial evidence. Undaunted, Insalaco won an extraordinary writ from the Sixth Appellate District, which found that the clergy-penitent privilege did not apply to any communications made by the client or her alleged rapist in meetings with Jehovah's Witness elders when third parties were present. "Now we can depose the elders, and they must testify to those conversations," says Lynch. Insalaco also is a mainstay of the Family Law Project of the San Francisco Bar Association's Volunteer Legal Services Program, having handled more than 30 pro bono cases since 1992.

Byron J. Gross

HOOPER LUNDY & BOCKMAN, LOS ANGELES

For nearly two decades, Gross has worked pro bono for the HIV and AIDS Legal Services Alliance (HALSA), pursuing health care access and federal disability-benefit appeals. He has personally represented more than 20 clients living with HIV and AIDS. Gross's work includes settling an HIV-discrimination case in which the client had been denied medical treatment, and litigating an ERISA complaint for a client whose insurance carrier had denied long-term disability benefits. He usually has at least one open pro bono case with HALSA, spending 10 to 50 hours on each. When a HALSA client had his Supplemental Security Income payments and Medi-Cal coverage suspended last year without explanation—and then was charged \$16,500 for an overpayment—Gross took the case and discovered that the Social Security Administration had erred. After several months of advocacy, the SSA waived the \$16,500 overcharge. Gross also got the client's health care benefits reinstated.



Richard R. Wiebe

SOLE PRACTITIONER, SAN FRANCISCO

Wiebe's pro bono work for the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and the Center for Biological Diversity takes up easily more than half his practice. Since 2001 he has worked on EFF cases dealing with free speech, privacy, and electronic voting machines. More recently, he played a critical role in EFF's suit against AT&T regarding the corporation's role in the National Security Agency's warrantless spying on Internet and telephone communications. Wiebe is the primary author and key strategist of the 50-page brief the EFF will present to the court this month, arguing that a law giving retroactive immunity to carriers in the government's surveillance program, signed by President Bush in July, is unconstitutional. "We could not do this case without Rick," says Cindy A. Cohn, legal director of the EFF, which fights for citizen's online rights. "He took the lead on the separation of powers and due process arguments. This motion will determine whether AT&T and the other phone carriers are going to be held accountable for violating their customers' trust and privacy." Wiebe has also provided advice over the past seven years to the Center for Biological Diversity on a variety of ongoing environmental cases. He represented the center and one of its members in litigation against an Altamont wind farm, handling the briefing, the trial, and the appeal. ●



Michelene E. Insalaco

SUCHERMAN-INSALACO, SAN FRANCISCO

Insalaco took on an appellate issue for Kimberly E. Lynch, a family law attorney in Morgan Hill, in a pending case on behalf of her client, a woman litigating a child-custody dispute with the child's biological father. The mother did not

