



Josefsberg wins Simon Pro Bono Service Award

By Jan Pudlow
Senior Editor

To explain how he ended up center stage at the Florida Supreme Court to receive the state's highest public service award, 71-year-old Robert Josefsberg reached back a century to his grandfather's three-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn.

Within its walls, for a decade, grandfather Jake invited hundreds of refugees from Russia and Germany to stay with him when they first arrived in America.

"My father, his two brothers, and sister never knew who would be sleeping on the floor or on a cot next to them when they woke up in the morning. My grandfather never got recognition. He never got an award — until today."

Josefsberg — a senior partner handling commercial and white-collar criminal litigation at Podhurst, Orseck in Miami, and this year's recipient of the Tobias Simon Award on January 28 — went on to describe a family tree laden with charitable souls.

His father, a lawyer, spent countless hours working for charity. His mother contributed her energy to charity. One daughter works at Put Something Back Pro Bono Project at the Dade County Bar Legal Aid Society; another daughter serves the public as an assistant state attorney.

"My sons, they work for a living. They are very charitable. They golf. They give me strokes. They ski, and they lift me up when I have fallen down, which is what we are supposed to be doing for each other."

And his wife, Marlene, founded an organization where she works full-time for drug-free youth.

"So by way of explanation, the genetics environment from where I came is such that I really didn't have much of a choice about doing pro bono," said Josefsberg, who has volunteered about 1,800 hours of free legal service, including complex pro bono work that others shy away from.

After graduating from Yale Law School in 1962, Josefsberg wound up in Miami, soon working for U.S. Attorney Bill Meadows, who was also a lay leader of a Methodist church, and then prominent Miami attorney and community worker Bill Colson.

He named a long list of inspirational friends that included Chesterfield Smith, John Kozyak, Sandy D'Alemberte, Bob Graham, Herman Russomanno, David Rothman, Arthur England, Vance Salter, Richard Milstein, and Steve Zack.

"I didn't get up one morning and say, 'I want to do pro bono.' I had so much peer pressure that I had no choice," Josefsberg said.

He was also friends with the award's namesake.

"When I was on the [Florida Bar] Board of Governors, there was a crazy who came up from Dade County named Toby Simon. My main function was to be a liaison between him and the rest of the board. And it was a wonderful three years translating for him and for them and working things out," Josefsberg said.

It's not a coincidence, he said, that he's the third person from his firm to receive the Tobias Simon Award, after Victor Diaz, Jr., (2000), Katherine Ezell (2006), as well as a former law clerk Jacqueline

Valdespino (2003).

"The reason why? Aaron Podhurst has created an atmosphere where we are expected to work with the community," Josefsberg said.

Bar President Jesse Diner said that during fiscal year 2008-09, Florida lawyers contributed more than \$4.4 million to legal aid and more than 1.5 million hours of pro bono service.

Chief Justice Peggy Quince began the ceremonial session honoring many lawyers, saying, "I know of no other profession that gives more freely and unselfishly of their services. This is work deserving of public recognition, which is why we are here today."

She then asked for a round of applause for the thousands of Florida lawyers who earnestly carry out free legal service for the poor every day.

While Josefsberg was the star standing in the pro bono spotlight, he said: "I don't own this award. I'm just symbolic. They had to select one of all of us to get the award. And they picked me, because maybe I'm the oldest, the last friend of Toby's, or the tallest. But every one of you deserves it just as much, as do many other people who aren't even here today.

"But I'll accept on behalf of all of you, if you'll make this commitment to me as to what you can do. As I get older and I'm able to do less, I find that mentoring, role-modeling, and coaching is just as worthwhile and maybe even more worthwhile.

"Because, you see, if each of you puts in 200 hours, in 10 years you can get 2,000 hours in community service. But if each of you inspires 10 other people to do this, you can figure out the math. That's 20,000 hours you can give to the community in the next 10 years."

Just as Chesterfield Smith and Bill Meadows mentored many lawyers who then, in turn, multiplied their pro bono service hours by the thousands, Josefsberg asked those in the audience to do the same.

"I'm not going to tell you to do pro bono. You do it. You do it as much and more than I do. What I am going to ask you to do is publicize it. Let everyone know how happy you are, how fulfilled you are, that they can do the same thing. By doing that, eventually, we'll achieve our goals in getting justice for everyone."



JOSEFSBERG