

**2002**

**PRO BONO  
PUBLICO  
AWARDS**

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**WASHINGTON, D.C.**



**Defending Liberty  
Pursuing Justice**

**Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service**





*Michael Miller*

I am grateful to the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service for bestowing this great honor upon me. I am also deeply grateful to Norman Reimer, President-Elect of the New York County Lawyers' Association, and to all of my other friends and colleagues that wrote letters of support.

It seems a little strange to receive recognition for simply doing the right thing. I have many blessings for which I am most grateful and have long felt that those who are privileged carry a moral debt that can never be fully repaid. Amongst my blessings there are none more precious than the love and support of my wonderful family-my wife, Cindy, and our two terrific kids, Danielle and Max. Without their understanding and support of my dedication to pro bono work I would not have been able to make the modest contributions I have made.

I am one of the thousands of lawyers that view the practice of law as not merely a path to influence and prosperity, but also as a path to empower the powerless, as a path to help those in need. Every day, thousands of lawyers contribute their "stock in trade" to benefit the less advantaged. Indeed, much of the great social progress of the Twentieth Century occurred in large part as a result of the efforts of lawyers. In efforts as diverse as women's suffrage, civil rights, equal education, voting rights, equal employment opportunities, and many more, lawyers played pivotal roles.

In 1996, I spent one month in war-torn Bosnia shortly after the Dayton Accords, serving as an Election Supervisor. In 1999, I interviewed Kosovar refugees for evidence of war crimes. In both of those projects I was deeply moved by the human suffering I encountered. However, the post-9/11 work was the toughest work of any kind I've ever done. This may be because it was home, because I was so close in age and background to many of the victims, or because the New York County Lawyers' Association, of which I am the President, is located one-half block from Ground Zero and there was concern for the safety of our staff. During the days immediately following the devastating attacks on the World Trade Center, lawyers were among the first volunteers and our contributions were meaningful indeed.

Two important messages emerged from the cowardly attacks of 9/11: we Americans are at our very best when things are at their worst and there is still great nobility in our profession. While September 11, 2001 was a dreadful day, it was also the beginning of one of the Bar's finest hours. As was well-publicized, hundreds of lawyers, senior partners from large firms and solo practitioners, retired judges and newly admitted, volunteered to assist victims' survivors in preparing, coordinating and filing the required documents for the issuance of death certificates. I was merely one soldier in this army of lawyers doing what we could to help those who had lost loved ones.

This sad work involved interviewing survivors individually and listening to stories of fateful changes of schedules, last good-byes, painful last telephone calls from trapped loved ones, the cries of children left without parents. Lawyers are not often thought of as relief workers but that's what we were, doing what we were uniquely qualified to do to help. It was very painful work-we all heard moving, heartbreaking stories. A husband told me that he and his late wife had learned on September 10 that she was finally pregnant after trying for two years. Another husband, left with three small children, described receiving four calls from his late wife while she was trapped with co-workers in Tower One. A father, a very angry father, described his late 23-year-old daughter, who had flown into New York for one day, September 11, to attend an early morning seminar at the World Trade Center. A woman told me that her late husband, who had just gone back to work after having nearly died during quadruple bypass surgery, joked that he had cheated death. A Russian man, who had recently emigrated to the United States with his late wife and four year old son, told of how his wife had modeled her clothes to decide what to wear on her first day of work, September 11.

I am very proud of the way the local bar associations worked together from the outset. The New York County Lawyers' Association coordinated with the New York State Bar Association, the Association of the Bar of the City of New York and other bar associations in the effort to assist victims of the September 11 tragedy. It was the Bar's finest hour and I am proud to have been a small part of that meaningful effort.