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Equal Justice honors pro bono and legal aid supporters

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by Joe Wilhelm Jr., Staff Writer

There was both joy and sadness at the Jacksonville Area Legal Aid Robert J. Beckham Equal Justice Awards Tuesday, which was dedicated to the memory of former The Jacksonville Bar President Joseph Milton.

The annual ceremony recognizes the legal community for its support of pro bono work and Jacksonville Area Legal Aid.

Milton's firm, Milton, Leach, Whitman, D'Andrea & Eslinger, was recognized for having 100 percent of its firm supporting pro bono efforts.

Florida Coastal School of Law was the recipient of the Robert J. Beckham Equal Justice Award because of its efforts to produce lawyers dedicated to providing access to the courts for all.

"I applaud Florida Coastal for spawning a generation of young lawyers who appreciate, value and cherish what the whole purpose of this profession was in the first place, to ensure access for all," said former Florida Bar President Hank Coxe, the keynote speaker.

"To the students of Coastal and all of you in this room who do believe, and act accordingly, and who never given up the fight, I share the words of the great UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, 'Reputation is what other people say about you. Character is who you are.'"

JALA Executive Director Michael Figgins suggested a name change for the area law school.

"It's called Florida Coastal, but the 'C' to me meant community, Florida Community School of Law, because that's what they are. They are the law school for this community," he said.

"I have seen over the years hundreds of well-rounded, clinically trained, compassionate, justice-minded students come out of that institution. It can't be because (Coastal) got the luck of the draw and they got good kids. Somebody is teaching that and they are learning it, and as a legal aid director, I'm very impressed," he said.

JALA employs 19 Florida Coastal graduates.

"That's nearly half of our staff, and they are crackerjack lawyers," said Figgins.

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Fourth Circuit Chief Assistant Public Defender Refik Eler and Felony Court Unit Director Fred Gazaleh. Both earned Pro Bono Service awards.
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Florida Coastal Dean and Professor Peter Goplerud said he was thankful for the award and the staff that has helped the school serve the community.

"It is these people and others in our clinic and others on our faculty who are inspirational to our students in encouraging them to get involved in serving the underserved and representing those who most need it in our communities," said Goplerud, referring to Vice Dean Terri Davlantes, Professor Karen Millard, Associate Professor Laura Boeckman and Assistant Professor Lois Ragsdale standing behind him.

JALA Board of Directors President Hugh Cotney recognized the efforts of the board by honoring it with the President's Award.

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