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'Big-hearted' lawyer stands out for service

Johnsen gets pro bono award from bar group for traffic court work

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In her five years managing volunteers for two pro bono programs, Megan Healy McClung has never found a more committed participant than John C. Johnsen.

Most of the volunteers take on one or two cases each year, but Johnsen handles more than 50.

"He's just such a big-hearted, genuine person who really cares about helping others," McClung said. "That would be the one thing that really sets him apart."

Johnsen, 35, will receive the "Pro Bono Advocate of the Month Award" from Illinois Legal Aid Online in May for his work with programs that are run by The Chicago Bar Association.

Johnsen graduated from The John Marshall Law School in 2007 and works as a sole practitioner. He said 80 percent of his cases are pro bono.

"I have bills and all that kind of stuff, but I have a hard time saying, 'No,'" said Johnsen, who goes by his middle name, Christopher.

"I get to do something really purposeful and meaningful, and I get to work with people who really do need help."

Johnsen participates in the CBA's Summary Suspension Volunteer Program, which provides legal aid to people facing a suspension of their driver's licenses due to a driving

while intoxicated charge. He represents the client at a hearing in which a judge rules whether to reinstate the person's license early.

The proceeding can last up to two hours and often requires Johnsen to cross-examine the police officer who made the arrest.

"It's a fantastic experience. ... The best cross-examination is of a police officer, and there's no better experience than to take on some of these cases," McClung said.

Johnsen traces his commitment to the program — and several other local organizations and initiatives — to a moment in the early 2000s when he first decided to go to law school.

He had recently graduated from DePaul University and watched a news program about Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old college student tortured and murdered in Wyoming, reportedly because he was gay.

"This light went on — and I had this epiphany that I needed to go to law school," said Johnsen, who is openly gay. He believed that law school would allow him to protect and assist people like Shepard.

But a legal education presented more challenges than Johnsen expected, and sometimes he struggled to see the "big picture" of how his classroom experience would allow him to eventually do meaningful work, he said.

"I don't want to make it sound like I was moving boulders, or that I was absolutely miserable," he said. "But it felt like a square peg, round hole kind of thing. ... You don't always feel like you're smart enough."



John C. Johnsen

Adding to his doubt, Johnsen failed the bar exam twice, the second time by only 10 points. He sought assistance from Minority Legal Education Resources Inc., which provides bar exam preparation for minorities.

The help Johnsen got from that organization gave him the confidence to keep taking the bar exam and pursue a legal career, he said.

When he passed the exam in 2010, he called legal aid organizations three days later to start volunteering, eager to get hands-on experience.

At the time, he was working in the litigation bill review group for Zurich Insurance Co. in Schaumburg. When he started using vacation days to do pro bono work, he decided to leave Zurich and start his own practice.

"I'm not wallowing in money, but I love what I do," he said. "I didn't think I would ever get there."

Johnsen volunteers with the Cook County Circuit Court's Juvenile Mentoring Initiative

and Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers.

He also works as a guardian ad litem for adults with disabilities through Chicago Volunteer Legal Services and drafts petitions for divorce through the Legal Aid Society of Metropolitan Family Services.

"Christopher goes beyond the pale, because he's just so involved in so many activities and helps in so many different areas," said Cook County Circuit Judge Grace G. Dickler.

Dickler met Johnsen after he volunteered to record the meeting minutes for a language access subcommittee that Dickler co-chairs with Cook County Circuit Judge Laura Chayu Liu as part of the Illinois Supreme Court's Access to Justice Commission.

Cook County Circuit Judge Daniel J. Gallagher presides over many of the summary suspension hearings where Johnsen appears. He noticed Johnsen's commitment to his clients, even when that means returning multiple times for a hearing that gets delayed.

"You think about people's ability to drive — it's a very serious thing," Gallagher said. "Obviously it's not taken lightly, and Christopher handles it quite well."

Johnsen hopes his volunteer experience will generate more clients and eventually lead to a full-time legal position.

"It really has been a journey," he said.

"All these things started coming together and it was kind of like, the universe saying, 'You know, you would actually like being a lawyer. You would not just like it, but love it.'"