

Honoring the Heroes Among Us - Sylvia Walbolt: A Hero With a Lifetime of Service



Some stars burn brightly but fade fast. Others burn steady and strong and last a lifetime. Sylvia Walbolt is St. Petersburg's strong and steady star. Walbolt, a shareholder at Carlton Fields, graduated from University of Florida College of Law in 1963 and blazed a trail for female attorneys. As she advanced, she never lost sight of what it meant to have the privilege of practicing law. Over her 45 years of practicing law, her hallmark has been excellence, particularly when one describes her pro bono and community service.

After earning her undergraduate and law degrees at the University of Florida, Walbolt entered the practice of law at a time when it was not easy for women to succeed. Over the years, she achieved Board Certification in Appellate Law and Antitrust Law. She has appeared as counsel in more than 290 published opinions, is the former president of the American Academy of Appellate Lawyers and is a Fellow of the American College of Trial Lawyers. In December 2001, she was named one of the Top 10 Women Litigators by the National Law Journal. No hurdle has stood in her way to becoming one of the most respected attorneys in the nation.

Pro bono...."for the good of the public."

From the time she began practicing law, Sylvia Walbolt has been committed to delivering legal services to those who cannot afford to pay an attorney. Walbolt cites her mentor, William Reece Smith, as instilling her with the drive to deliver pro bono service to the poor. Her commitment to pro bono is rivaled by few in the legal community.

In 2008, the Florida Supreme Court presented her with the Tobias Simon Pro Bono Service Award. In the remarks she gave when she accepted the award, she plainly explained her view that "those licensed to practice law don't deserve the proud title of lawyer unless they are willing to give generously of their time, talent, and expertise in serving those who need legal services and cannot afford them. Law has become too important in our society to deny anyone access to it."

Walbolt has done a tremendous job emulating Reece Smith's ideal, both in delivering legal services as well as teaching the value of pro bono to others. In the May 2008 edition of *Florida Trend*, she was quoted explaining to law students at the University of Florida Levin College of Law that "they would 'miss out on the very best part of the practice of law' if they did not do pro bono work after becoming lawyers."

In the Florida Supreme Court's announcement of the Simon Award, Reece Smith said, "Sylvia has worked tirelessly for the poor because she believes it is her professional responsibility to do so, and because she passionately believes in protecting the rights of those who are unable to afford counsel. Her enthusiasm and genuine dedication to pro bono services helped imprint her commitment to pro bono service upon the hundreds of attorneys who have worked with her and admired her excellence and dedication to the poor and incarcerated."

In addition to the Tobias Simon Award, the highest pro bono award in Florida, her contributions to the legal profession have been recognized nationwide. In 2008, she was elected for membership in the Warren E. Burger Society by the National Center for State Courts. The Warren E. Burger Society honors individuals who have demonstrated an exemplary commitment to improving the administration of justice through extraordinary contributions of service or support to the NCSC.

In 2006, the ABA Section of



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Litigation presented her with its John Minor Wisdom Public Service and Professionalism Award, which recognizes outstanding contributions by those who serve “the equity of justice,” ensuring that the legal system is open and available to all.

She has also worked for years to preserve funding for legal services programs in the state of Florida. She is a Past-President of the Florida Bar Foundation and continues as a Life Member.

Walbolt remains actively involved in organizations whose primary mission is to ensure equal access to justice and promote pro bono representation. These efforts include serving on the Board of Trustees of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, an organization that seeks to obtain equal opportunity for minorities by addressing factors that contribute to racial justice and economic opportunity. She also served as national chair of the American College of Trial Lawyers’ Access to Justice Committee, and she continues to be active in the College’s efforts to champion pro bono service on an individual basis among attorneys.

Community Service

In addition to helping the less fortunate receive legal services, Walbolt is also committed to serving the community outside of the practice of law. She was a founding member and a former Director of the H. Lee Moffitt Cancer and Research Institute. Walbolt and her husband suffered the tragic loss of a child to cancer at a time when there were no cancer hospitals in the Tampa Bay area. Following this

personal heartache, Walbolt decided to do what she could to help other families who faced this tragedy. She worked for years to help establish Moffitt as a preeminent cancer institution in the United States, yet another task in which she succeeded. She is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Bayfront Medical System. We thank her, both publicly and privately, for turning her personal loss into a vehicle that saves lives everyday. She shows us how work should be accomplished and how life should be lived.

While we honor Walbolt as a legal and civic pioneer, she has consistently credited her husband and son with being a part of her success. Perhaps Walbolt’s most important contribution to this community is that she teaches us, her fellow legal professionals, that we can achieve success beyond imagination with the assistance and support of others; friends, co-workers, neighbors, but, most importantly, our family.

We admire our heroes for their noble qualities and the example they set for others. Sylvia Walbolt has shined in

her commitment to the community throughout her entire career, and the St. Petersburg Bar Foundation is proud to recognize her as a Hero Among Us.

Carin Constantine is a member of the Board of Trustees of the St. Petersburg Bar Foundation. She is the sole shareholder of The Law Office of Carin M. Constantine, P.A. and practices family law in the Tampa Bay area.

