

VETERANS LEGAL INSTITUTE: HONORING VETERANS WITH *PRO BONO* LEGAL SERVICES

by ROSANNA E. MORENO



Photos by Myranda Josephson

L to R: This year's honoree, Justice Eileen Moore, presented by OCBA President, Ashleigh Aitken; Justice Eileen Moore; Justice Eileen Moore swearing in VLI Board of Directors

Veterans Legal Institute (VLI) is a nonprofit organization based in Orange County that holds the distinction of being the nation's only military-specific public-interest law firm providing free legal services to qualifying veterans.

Operation Justice: VLI's Inaugural Fundraising Gala

On March 12, 2015, VLI hosted its first fundraising event entitled "Operation Justice," honoring veterans and patriots who served and support the U.S. Armed Forces.

The event drew approximately 200 attendees, including distinguished Orange County superior court judges, local attorneys, business owners, corporate representatives, community leaders, military veterans, and supporters of the veteran community. With the generous support of its twenty-four inaugural-event spon-

sors, the success of Operation Justice signaled an overwhelming commitment of Orange County business and legal communities to veterans' causes.

VLI's Board of Directors President Bobby McDonald—a leader in the veteran community who served two tours of duty in the Vietnam War—was the evening's Master of Ceremonies. The fundraiser introduced VLI's co-founders, Antoinette Balta and Dwight Stirling, who both spoke about VLI's purpose, mission, and forward momentum. Additionally, the eleven members of the VLI Board of Directors were introduced. The evening featured testimonials from VLI's clients, who attested to the quality of legal services provided by VLI's attorneys, and the impact this work had on their lives.

Furthermore, Ashleigh Aitken, Orange County Bar Association President, graciously served as Operation Justice's award present-

er and introduced this year's honoree, Justice Eileen C. Moore of the 4th District Court of Appeal, a Vietnam War veteran. Justice Moore was honored for her advocacy of active duty service members and veterans.

During Justice Moore's acceptance speech, she spoke about her own personal experience as a service member, her career as a veteran legal advocate, and the unique challenges veterans have faced due to the unavailability of legal services. Justice Moore encouraged members of the Orange County legal community to fill this gap in legal resources by helping our local veterans. Her paramount message—titled Giving Back to Veterans—was echoed by Mr. McDonald, who ended the evening by asking the audience: "What have you done for a veteran today?"

As part of the inaugural event, each member of VLI's Board of Directors was officially sworn in

by Justice Moore, and was recognized for his or her service by the office of Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez. All of the proceeds raised through Operation Justice will go to support VLI's operations and its mission to provide *pro bono* legal services to homeless, at-risk, disabled, and low-income veterans.

VLI's Purpose: Outreach, Compassion, Quality, Leadership, and Empowerment

Founded in 2014, VLI aims to eradicate barriers to housing, education, employment and healthcare, and foster self-sufficiency. VLI accomplishes this mission by providing direct legal services in-house, a broad network of *pro bono* attorneys, and offsite legal clinics throughout Los Angeles and Orange counties. VLI also advocates on behalf of all active and former service members through promoting community outreach and public policy to increase awareness and resources.

Matters handled by VLI include petitions to upgrade discharge status, which can affect a client's eligibility for benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, healthcare, and other benefits promised under their terms of service. VLI's attorneys assist with adjusting appropriate levels of support for disabilities stemming from service. VLI handles criminal and civil matters, including petitions to expunge criminal records, estate planning, family law, and nonprofit and small business assistance. In 2015, VLI has already helped more than 500 veterans.

VLI's momentum is fueled by the tireless support of the veteran community and the passion of VLI's co-founders. VLI's Co-Founder/CEO Dwight Stirling, himself a

military veteran, was an active duty JAG Officer with the California National Guard. Stationed at the Joint Forces Training Base in Los Alamitos, California, he served as the installation's general counsel and legal advisor to the commanding general. Major Stirling is the former head of the California National Guard's Criminal Law Division and the former director of the California National Guard's nationally recognized JAG Internship, a program he created.

Co-Founder/President Antoinette Balta is a member of the California State Military Reserve

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and brings to VLI the many benefits of a distinguished career as a veteran advocate. She comes with a passion and dedication to serve homeless and at-risk veterans and service members. Before coming to VLI, Ms. Balta was integral in developing the Orange County Public Law Center's "Operation Veterans Re-Entry" Project, which served over 700 veterans in the last three years. She currently chairs the legal/re-entry working group for the Orange County Veterans and Military Families Collaborative, which is comprised of over 100 veteran-serving organizations.

Support for Operation Justice,

and for events occurring throughout the year, honors VLI's clients who have demonstrated bravery and dedication to this country, protecting us at home and abroad.

VLI gives back to its many clients who have served in combat and who have endured significant physical, emotional, and psychological wounds. All of VLI's clients made sacrifices for our nation's safety and freedom, and face challenges in their transitions back to civilian life. In honor of their courage and service, VLI provides free legal services to low-income veterans and military members in a number of critical areas. VLI hopes to empower clients in achieving a greater measure of self-sufficiency, and with that, to experience the lives they deserve.



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