

# Chancellor Marie Wilson receives Beacon of Justice Award

September 16, 2016

Chancellor Marie Wilson of Greenville was honored Thursday, Sept. 15, with the Beacon of Justice Award presented by the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project.

The Beacon of Justice Award recognizes an individual who has exhibited outstanding leadership in promoting and supporting equal access to justice, particularly as it relates to pro bono services. The award was among several presented during the third annual Pro Bono Awards Dinner at the Old Capitol Inn in Jackson.

Judge Wilson was recognized for her work to assist self-represented litigants. The Washington County Chancery



**Chancellor Marie Wilson, at left, accepts the Beacon of Justice Award from MVLVP Board of Directors Chair Mary Clay Morgan and MVLVP Board Immediate Past Chair Steven Gray.**

paperwork associated with the legal proceedings. Volunteer attorneys may explain proceedings, provide information and answer questions. The attorneys are not obligated to accompany clinic participants to court and file documents. The expectation is that individuals will be able to represent themselves in court.

Judge Wilson is on the bench to hear the case. Most cases involve family law issues such as no fault divorces, child support, visitation and name change.

Judge Wilson said she started the program out of necessity to meet the needs of people who could not afford to hire attorneys. Self-represented litigants struggle to correctly draft legal documents. During a court hearing, their lack of knowledge of the law and court rules makes it difficult for them to adequately represent themselves.

“It was frustrating,” Judge Wilson said. “As a judge, I couldn’t help them. I couldn’t be their lawyer.” Having volunteer lawyers to assist low-income people has made a big difference. “It has worked out well,” Judge Wilson said.

About 95 percent of the litigants get their matters resolved on Pro Se Day, Carpenter-Sanders said.

Judge Wilson was elected to the Ninth Chancery Court in November 2002 and took office in January 2003. She practiced law for 24 years before she took the bench. She worked with North Mississippi Rural legal Services, where she became managing attorney and served on the Board of Directors. She was a staff attorney at the Center for Constitutional Rights. She worked as an assistant public defender for Washington County, as public defender in Sunflower County, and as public defender for the Fourth Circuit Drug Court. She is former vice president of the Mississippi Public Defender Association. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology, a specialized certificate in criminal justice and a Juris Doctorate from Rutgers University.

Court’s quarterly pro se clinic for low-income people is a model for the state, said MVLVP Executive Director Gayla Carpenter-Sanders.

Since 2007, Judge Wilson has set special times to hear legal disputes involving litigants who can’t afford to hire lawyers to represent them. The special hearing times grew into the quarterly Pro Se Day that is a cooperative effort of the Washington County Bar Association, the University of Mississippi School of Law Pro Bono Initiative, the Mississippi Center for Justice and the Volunteer Lawyers Project.

Jackson State University students also are expected to participate in the next Pro Se Day, which is set for Sept. 21, Judge Wilson said.

On Pro Se Day, volunteer lawyers and students are at the courthouse to meet with self-represented litigants and assist them in correcting