Pro bono's common thread
By Margaret Benson
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While this month's Chicago Lawyer is all about pro bono, this column is all about pro bono rock stars.

Not the ones who win at the Grammys, but the ones who play courtrooms, clinics and classrooms around Chicago. These attorneys rock the legal world with their public spirit, talent and commitment. And, like Lady Gaga and Cee Lo Green at the Grammys, these five attorneys were recently honored by The Chicago Bar Association and the Chicago Bar Foundation before hundreds of their peers for their outstanding work.

This year's Best New Artist, known in Chicago as the "Maurice Weigle Exceptional Young Lawyer Award," is Jordan Heinz.

Since becoming a lawyer and joining Kirkland & Ellis in 2005, he has contributed more than 1,600 pro bono hours. That's around 25 pro bono hours each month of his relatively short legal career. And that's while working as an associate at a firm not known for coddling its attorneys.

In addition to litigating a myriad of difficult cases for various legal aid programs, Jordan also inspires and encourages his colleagues to pitch in, working with the firm's pro bono leaders to plan and implement pro bono projects.

In his spare time, he is active on legal service organization boards and committees.

Erin Maus of Baker & McKenzie is this year's Lady Gaga of Chicago's Big Law, winning raves from the little monsters who are her fans.

A talented litigator, Erin has donated many, many pro bono hours for disabled and elderly clients as well as serving as president of a legal aid board of directors.

Whether it is resolving a Social Security issue, litigating a special education controversy, drafting end-of-life documents for a senior or volunteering at a Daley Center help desk, Erin embraces both the practice and spirit of pro bono. That's why she is this year's "Edward J. Lewis II Pro Bono Service Award" recipient.

The government rock star award, aka the "Richard J. Phelan Public Service Award," went to Kendall Hill, deputy of Criminal Operations for the Cook County public defender's office.

An assistant public defender for nearly 30 years, Kendall has tried more than 75 jury trials, supervises and mentors scores of less experienced colleagues and helps to train public defenders around the country. Eschewing the big bucks a private legal career would bring, Kendall represents society's castoffs day in and day out.
On television shows, the prosecutors are the good guys, while the defense attorneys are sleazy or incompetent. But this is not so in real life. While colleagues praise his superior skills, Kendall said he believes that every individual is entitled to a zealous advocate and to be treated with respect. And, in doing so, Kendall honors and guards the constitutional rights of all of us.

Stacey Platt's clients are often too young to appreciate her help.

Recipient of the "Leonard Jay Schrager Award of Excellence," Stacey is an associate professor and associate director of Loyola University Chicago School of Law's Civitas ChildLaw Clinic.

Regularly appointed to serve as a child's representative in high conflict custody cases in the Domestic Relations Division, Stacey represents children who are in the middle of messy, often nasty and sometimes, dangerous custody fights.

Stacey's cases involve domestic violence, substance abuse, mental and physical health problems and seriously dysfunctional family relationships. While her role is seemingly simple, her job is not as she has to navigate the often contradictory versions of the best interest of the child that the parties, attorneys and others bring to the fight. In addition to her excellent courtroom work, Stacey teaches law students how to effectively advocate for children and works with attorneys around the country to improve their courtroom advocacy skills.

While the corporate world honors management and best practices, Sandy Wall, franchise practice group's managing counsel at McDonald's Corp., was recognized for her rock star work in the pro bono field.

Recipient of this year's "Exelon Outstanding Corporate Counsel Award," Sandy was instrumental in building McDonald's U-Visa program which gives immigrant victims of violent crimes, including domestic violence, murder and rape, an avenue to permanent U.S. residency.

In addition to handling many of these cases herself, Sandy streamlined training materials and serves as the point of contact for McDonald's attorneys.

Notice the similarities between these award winners?

Whether they work in the world of big law, government, education or corporations, they all handle difficult, time-consuming cases and encourage their colleagues to do the same.

They take active roles on the boards of their organizations and share their passion through teaching and mentoring other attorneys.

Jordan, Erin, Kendall, Stacey and Sandy: Excellent attorneys.

Committed, generous individuals. Inspirational leaders.

Rock stars.