

Pro Bono Attorney of the Month
Leslie H. Tayne

*By Ellen Krakow
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The Suffolk Pro Bono Project is very pleased to honor **Leslie H. Tayne** (Melville, N.Y.) as its Pro Bono Attorney of the Month for the work she has done on behalf of our consumer debt clients. This is Ms. Tayne's first time receiving this honor.

The daughter of an attorney, Leslie Tayne attended Touro Law School immediately after graduating from SUNY Albany in 1993, and she obtained her Juris Doctorate in 1996. Public service was her focus during law school and during her first year after graduating. While at Touro, she interned with the Suffolk County Attorney's office and the Attorney General in the Suffolk County office. Her first job upon graduating from Touro was with Nassau County Legal Aid, where she represented clients in parole revocation hearings. Nine months later, she switched gears and began working for a national debt settlement company, as chief in house counsel where she began her career as a consumer debt attorney.

Two years later, Ms. Tayne made the bold move of setting up her own debt resolution practice. Making the move even more challenging was the fact that she had three children under the age of two-and-a-half at the time. The firm, Tayne Law Group, has grown substantially over the years. In addition to her office in Melville, she has three additional offices in Manhattan, Mount Kisco, and White Plains.

Tayne Law Group's clients span a broad income spectrum. Clients include, at one end, professional athletes, successful artists, attorneys and people in the financial industry. Those at the other end include clients with disabilities who cannot work, people who have lost their jobs, and the working poor. A sizable portion of her clients are upper middle income but still living paycheck to paycheck and unable to keep up with their expenses.

The one qualifier she insists upon from all of her clients is a willingness to work with her and follow her recommendations. Ms. Tayne is often able to negotiate new payment agreements even where there is no defense. Whether or not new terms can be negotiated depends on a many factors, such as the relationship between her client and the particular creditor. The nature of the debt can also be a major factor. According to Ms. Tayne, credit card lenders are generally willing to negotiate with debtors. Lease-related debts, she has observed, are typically harder to address. Perhaps the most significant factor, says Ms. Tayne, is her relationship with the creditors. She explains, "I've built a reputation over the years and a sense of trust with many different creditors, and that plays a big part in the negotiations." The fact that she has worked successfully with so many different creditors and their attorneys is a key advantage for her clients. "You'd be surprised by the kinds of debts I've been able to successfully negotiate," notes Ms. Tayne, citing as an example the time she negotiated favorable payment terms from a casino marker to mitigate her client's gambling debt.

Leslie Tayne calls herself “the Debt Doctor” because of her approach with new clients. “When a client first come to my firm for help, they are so ashamed,” she explains. “Often, their debts have affected their marriage and their other relationships, so I need to be sensitive to that.” She reassures her clients by letting them know that she is not judging them and by reminding them that there is no shame in reaching out for her help. Says Ms. Tayne, “We know that life happens and that people make mistakes.”

Ms. Tayne has never rejected a pro bono referral and has forcefully advocated for the rights of our Pro Bono Project clients. One example was the assistance she provided to the mother of a disabled child. The child’s estranged father stole medical insurance proceeds, causing the child’s unpaid doctor’s to sue the client for reimbursement. Ms. Tayne intervened and had the matter dismissed.

“I get a lot of pleasure from the pro bono work I do,” says Ms. Tayne. “It is very satisfying to help someone who otherwise would never have had an attorney working with them,” she explains. “The clients have usually been through so much before they get to me that I feel it so important to use my skills and expertise to help them.” She credits her father for the personal importance she places on doing pro bono work, noting that he always incorporated pro bono work into his legal practice.

The Pro Bono Project is just one of many ways that Leslie Tayne gives back. She volunteered many hours at the Nassau County Bar Association’s Sandy Clinics, helping Sandy victims avoid foreclosure. She has worked with the health and human services provider, Family Service League, providing their disabled clients with free consumer debt assistance. She is currently working on a project to provide free financial and legal assistance to those with serious illnesses who are facing the prospect of mounting medical debt. She also volunteers her time speaking to groups about the student loan process and ways to prevent crippling student debt. In addition, Ms. Tayne serves as Vice Chair of Nassau Suffolk Law Services’ Advisory Council. “Leslie is always willing to help our agency and our clients”, says Maria Dosso, Nassau Suffolk Law Services’ Director of Communications and Volunteer Services adding, “She cares deeply about our mission and eagerly accepts our referrals. She truly stands out among our many volunteers.”

Things are no less busy for Leslie Tayne on the home front. She is the single mother of three children, Lindsey (a high school senior) and twins, Brandon and Gabrielle (high school sophomores). Home is also where you’ll find the six dogs she has taken in from the Long Island Guide Dog Foundation, some of them guide dog puppies-in-training.

The Pro Bono Project greatly appreciates the enthusiasm and skills that Leslie Tayne brings to her pro bono work. We look forward to our continued association with her. It is with great pleasure that we honor her as Pro Bono Attorney of the Month.

The Suffolk Pro Bono Project is a joint effort of Nassau Suffolk Law Services, the Suffolk County Bar Association and the Suffolk County Pro Bono Foundation, who, for many years, have joined resources toward the goal of providing free legal assistance to Suffolk County residents who are dealing with economic hardship. Nassau Suffolk Law Services is a non-profit civil legal services agency, providing free legal assistance to Long Islanders, primarily in the areas of benefits advocacy, homelessness prevention (foreclosure and eviction defense), access to health care, and services to special populations such as domestic violence victims, disabled, and adult home resident. The provision of free services is prioritized based on financial need and funding is often inadequate in these areas. Furthermore, there is no funding for the general provision of matrimonial or bankruptcy representation, therefore the demand for pro bono assistance is the greatest in these areas. If you would like to volunteer, please contact Ellen Krakow, Esq. 631 232-2400 x 3323.