

THE DAILY RECORD

WESTERN NEW YORK'S SOURCE FOR LAW, REAL ESTATE, FINANCE AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE SINCE 1908

Hope floats: Lights, camera on ABA award winner

By **ELIZABETH STULL**
Daily Record Reporter

Hope Olsson, a second-career attorney at a small, two-attorney firm, is in some ways an unlikely person to practice *pro bono*.

Nevertheless, the Rochester bankruptcy lawyer will be one of five recipients of the American Bar Association's 2009 *Pro Bono Publico Award* at the ABA's annual August meeting in Chicago.

"I feel like that lady on the TV show who wins a million dollars and then faints on stage," Olsson said Wednesday morning, as ABA cameramen prepared to interview her for a documentary film to be shown at the awards ceremony.

Olsson, a grandmotherly figure with bobbed white hair and glasses, is partner in the two-attorney law practice of Olsson & Feder LLP on Elmwood Avenue. For her film debut she wore a soft brown dress suit

and a modern brooch designed by her ex-husband, Gudmund Jos Olsson of Northfield Designer Goldsmiths on Park Avenue, Rochester. The producers adjusted their lighting to minimize reflections from her spectacles, gently lifted her ever-present pearls above the dress's modest neckline.

"You should only let two people put their hands on you – your doctor and the sound guy," a production tech tells her. "My lucky day," Olsson smiled.

As the film crew transformed a corner of the Monroe County Bar Association's 10th floor conference room with studio lighting and a boom microphone, the honoree described how she incorporates volunteer work into her busy law practice.



ABA *Pro Bono Publico Award* recipient Hope Olsson, left, being filmed Wednesday morning by production tech Bill Shackelton for a biographical ABA documentary about her *pro bono* work.

Olsson, 66, said she does not keep track of the hours she volunteers, or the number of clients she has represented for free. According to the Volunteer Legal Services Project of Monroe County, she has helped more than 400 *pro bono* clients since 2002.

She has also worked as a *pro bono* consultant for the Farmworker Legal Services of New York Inc., which has sought her help on some of its biggest cases.

One farm worker case in particular represents Olsson's proudest *pro bono* achievement, she said Wednesday.

The matter involved 17 migrant farm workers with claims for back pay, unpaid overtime and violations of the Agricultural Workers Protection Act. Agway, a co-defendant in the case, filed for bankruptcy halfway through the litigation.

"At any point in the day, if you needed to get a hold of [Olsson] to ask even the smallest question, she was just always available," Farmworker Legal Services executive director Lewis Papenfuse said Wednesday.

Continued ...

THE DAILY RECORD

WESTERN NEW YORK'S SOURCE FOR LAW, REAL ESTATE, FINANCE AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE SINCE 1908

Continued ...

Olsson mentored and coached the plaintiffs' attorneys, reviewed the bankruptcy court papers and eventually helped to recover more than \$100,000 for the plaintiffs.

Papenfuse said he is still disbursing the settlement funds from that case, several years later.

"I think it's a question of priorities," Olsson said. "You make up your mind what you want to do and then you get it done. I'm not a person who goes home at 5 o'clock every day, but I don't think most lawyers are."

Olsson said she does not distinguish between her *pro bono* cases and her paying clients.

"Once I'm doing a case it doesn't matter to me which it is," she said. "Obviously I have to make a living ... My partner

[attorney Eric Feder] — He would never complain that I'm doing too much free work. He's very supportive."

Olsson is an Ithaca native — "Some people say that's what's wrong with me," she said. She came to Rochester to attend college at the Rochester Institute of Technology and stayed, embarking on a career in software development for corporations including Westinghouse and Xerox Corp.

After 25 years, she needed a change, she said. At age 49, she began commuting to the University at Buffalo Law School.

Olsson credited the law school's public service program with engaging her in *pro bono* work. She clerked for federal bankruptcy Judge John Ninfo, Western District of New York, before entering private practice at Harter Secrest & Emery LLP, where she handled Chapter 11 bankruptcies.

Olsson left Harter Secrest to start her

own small firm in 2003.

"It's just so nice to be able to work on your own and set your own priorities," Olsson said.

In her nominating letter, VLSP Executive Director Sheila A. Gaddis described Olsson as "a role model" who has donated countless hours to *pro bono* service and advocated for creative approaches to increase *pro bono* opportunities.

In addition to handling individual cases, Olsson helped to develop VLSP's *pro bono* debt clinic and provides mentoring and instruction to other attorney volunteers.

"There are so many people waiting for a bankruptcy attorney," Olsson said. "if bankruptcy attorneys in Rochester don't step up to the plate, those people will not receive assistance."

— elizabeth.stull@nydailyrecord.com