

Holderness Serves From The Heart

Tommy Holderness serves from the heart, and that is where he receives the greatest reward for doing what he can to help those less fortunate than himself.

Recognized as the 2012 recipient of the William Thorp Award by the North Carolina Bar Association, Holderness is quick to discount himself as the Pro Bono Attorney of the Year for this or any other year.

Countless others will disagree, including scores of nameless individuals living, literally, on the streets of Charlotte. Years ago Holderness took it upon himself to hop on his bicycle on Sunday mornings and deliver homemade breakfast burritos to as many homeless people as possible.

The idea caught on, not only among the recipients, but also among his friends and colleagues, who now account for a small army providing nourishment and goodwill every week to a grateful following.

“I started out making 25 burritos a week,” said Holderness, who practices with Robinson, Bradshaw & Hinson. “After almost six years, we have ramped up to about 50 a week, although now I don’t even cook that much. I manage this huge list of volunteers. Someone brings the burritos to my house on Saturday, and riders show up at my house on Sunday morning.

“We deliver 40 to 60 on any given week. It is a very fluid process. I count on people showing up and amazingly they do. I walk out the door every Sunday morning wondering who is going to be there and leave at 7:30.”

Total delivery time is approximately an hour, depending on how much time it takes to deliver each burrito.

“It depends on whether people want to talk,” Holderness said. “Sometimes they want to get their burrito and turn and run, and sometimes there will be a couple of guys who want to talk, who want someone to listen to them.

“It is amazing how many of them want somebody in mainstream society just to talk to. People have a negative view of homeless people, so they appreciate somebody who is willing to look them in the eye and talk to them as a regular person.”

Holderness’ commitment to service extends into his law practice, as evidenced by his selection for the Thorp Award.

“Honestly there are two sides to it,” Holderness said. “On the one hand I am honored and appreciative. On the other hand, I worry that there wasn’t somebody better. I’d like to think that there are other people out there who are more deserving; I certainly hope there are.

“I assume they didn’t get nominated, which is too bad, because there have got to be people doing more than I am.”

If so, there are not many of them. In 2011, Holderness donated 590 hours representing five client families referred by Legal Aid of North Carolina. He provided leadership within his firm for pro bono assistance to many needy families in the community, and helped design and implement a legal support project for the homeless families who were temporarily housed in Hall House.

The families had six months to stabilize, clear credit barriers to housing and employment, and pursue individual rental homes.

Holderness also led a team of 15 transactional and litigation lawyers at RBH in surveying a wide range of legal needs for these families. This team provided direct representation, counsel and referrals regarding credit problems, government benefits, family status and estate planning for every issue presented by every responding family.

“There was a lot of background support there,” Holderness said while citing Susan Huber in particular for her extensive efforts with

one case. “There were a bunch of people involved; it was not like I had to do a whole lot to get people motivated.

“The resource base in the firm and the community make me look better than I should. So many people are willing to help and want to help, they just need a little nudge.”

And Holderness is just the right person to provide one, given his long history of outstanding service to indigent families. He currently serves on the board of Legal Services of Southern Piedmont, which recognized him in 2007 as its Volunteer of the Year.

He has also been recognized as the 2009 Volunteer of the Year by Legal Aid of North Carolina’s Charlotte office, and as an NCBA Citizen Lawyer Award winner in 2011.

Holderness and his wife, Sara, who serves on the faculty of the Charlotte School of Law, have three daughters. **•NL**



Tommy Holderness, left, accepts the 2012 Thorp Award from President Martin Brinkley.