

Public: Recent News

State Bar Presents New Awards Named for Specialization Founders

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The efforts of three NCBA members who helped establish the State Bar's specialization program two decades ago have been commemorated by the N.C. State Bar Board of Legal Specialization, which recently named new awards for NCBA members James E. Cross Jr. of Oxford and Asheville attorneys Howard L. Gum and Sarah H. Davis.

Initial presentation of the service and excellence awards took place last week at the annual specialists luncheon in Charlotte.

All three of the initial recipients are also NCBA members.

Christine L. "Christy" Myatt of Greensboro received the Howard L. Gum Service Award; the James E. Cross Jr. Leadership Award was presented to Joseph B. "Joe" Cheshire V of Raleigh; and the Sara H. Davis Excellence Award was presented to Maria L. Lynch, also of Raleigh.

Edward P. "Ted" Tewkesbury of Greensboro, who serves on the Board of Legal Specialization, provided the following commentary which precedes the summaries of each recipient:

For the first time in its 20 year history, the Board of Legal Specialization has established a way to recognize the excellent work of board certified specialists across the state.

As you know, board certified specialists represent the best of the image that the legal profession strives to show the public. They are committed to excellence in their practice areas, they continue to educate themselves about the latest developments in their fields, they receive high praise from their peers, and they studied for, and passed, a rigorous examination, even after swearing to all of their friends and family members that if they passed the Bar Exam, they were done with tests forever!

The Board takes its goals of providing a service to the public and encouraging competency among the bar, very seriously. We are proud and honored when you all do such good work. When we established these awards, we looked through our own history and named the awards for three people who were instrumental in setting the standards for one of the top legal specialization programs in the country. Today, we are honoring three board certified specialists, who were nominated by their peers for the following awards:

The Howard L. Gum Service Award is given to a specialty committee member who consistently excels in completing committee tasks. The eight specialty committees are the life blood of the specialization

program. They are responsible for evaluating every application for certification, including peer references, and writing and grading the examinations. The recipient of the Howard Gum award must be highly dedicated to legal specialization, donate his/her time to committee responsibilities, and respond to the needs of the State Bar staff and the Board, in exemplary fashion.

Howard Gum served as chair of the Family Law Specialty Committee of the board from 1988 until 1995. He organized and oversaw the preparation and administration of the first examination in family law, and, during his six years as chair of the committee, established the highest standards of organization and fairness, in the administration and grading of the specialty examinations and the peer review process. He helped to organize the informal association of family law specialists known as the “Family Law Roundtable” which still meets annually for professional development and camaraderie.

As a member of the Board of Legal Specialization from 1995 to 2001, Howard gave unselfishly of his time and talent, chaired numerous committees and review panels, helped to implement the board’s Professional Development Plan, heard complex appeals from denials of certification and re-certification, and encouraged the creation of advanced CLE courses. Howard also served as chair of the board from 1999 to 2001. He utilized his organizational skills, his enthusiasm for specialization, and his great humor to lead and inspire the members of the board, to take the creation of the web site for specialization from an idea to a reality, and to weather the vicissitudes of shepherding the new specialty of workers compensation law through a two-year approval process, thus honestly earning the nickname “Hired Gum”;

Howard’s ability to be tactful while getting straight to the point, to disagree without being disagreeable, to bring intellectual insight to problems while maintaining a common-sense approach, to treat everyone with courtesy and generosity regardless of station, and his impassioned support for and dedication to the specialization program led us to establish this award in his honor.

2006 Recipient of the Howard L. Gum Service Award

Christine L. Myatt

Christy Myatt received her law degree from Wake Forest University School of Law in 1982. She currently practices bankruptcy and creditors rights law with Nexsen Pruet Adams Kleemeier in Greensboro.

During her career, Christy has represented trustees, creditors’ committees, debtors, secured and unsecured creditors, bondholders, and others in complex bankruptcy cases in North Carolina, New York and Delaware. She is serving and has served as receiver in various state and federal matters. She has lectured at numerous state and regional seminars, and published extensively in her field.

As a board certified specialist in bankruptcy law since 1990, Christy was one of the first lawyers to recognize the significance of the specialization program to the public and to the professional development of lawyers. In her law firm, she has been instrumental in establishing board certification as the expectation for any lawyer practicing in a specialty area—whether it is bankruptcy law, estate planning or another specialty.

As a member of the Board of Legal Specialization from 1994 to 2000, Christy gave unselfishly of her

time and abilities. Her personal experience with board certification helped the board to make informed policy decisions about the certification and re-certification of lawyers, the allocation of resources, and the development of new areas of specialty. During her service on the board, she chaired numerous committees and review panels; she authored an in-depth professional development plan for the specialization program, planned the first luncheon to honor new specialists, heard complex appeals from denials of certification and re-certification, initiated study committees for the creation of new specialties, and, last but certainly not least, spread her infectious enthusiasm to the other members of the board, making service on the board not only professionally rewarding but down right fun. (This included introducing the members of the board to the spirituous effects of a drink called a “B-52” and thus becoming the official chair for life of the unofficial social committee of the board.)

As chair of the board from 1997 to 1999, Christy led the board in the development of new specialties in immigration law and workers’ compensation law and in the creation of an organized public relations campaign to educate lawyers and the public about the benefits of specialization.

After her service on the board concluded, Christy willingly agreed to serve on the Bankruptcy Specialty Committee, where she continues to fulfill her committee responsibilities with enduring optimism, a can-do attitude, and dedication to the specialization program.

The Sara H. Davis Excellence Award is presented to a certified specialist who exemplifies excellence in his/her daily work as an attorney and serves as a model for other lawyers. Special consideration was given for a long and consistent record of handling challenging matters successfully, for sharing knowledge and experience with other lawyers, for earning the respect and admiration of all others with whom the lawyer comes into contact in his/her daily work, and for high ethical standards.

Sara Davis was in the first class of applicants to become board certified in both business and consumer bankruptcy law in 1987. She joined the Board of Legal Specialization the following year and served two full terms, until 1994. Sara was appointed Chair of the Board in 1991, and served in this capacity for the next three years.

During Sara’s tenure as Chair, she responded to the difficult challenges faced by the program with spirit, a level head and the firm resolve to persevere and improve the program. As chair, she faced numerous challenges including the successful defense of the program’s requirements from a proposal to water down the standards for certification by eliminating the examination requirement; she helped to get the program on a firm financial footing after many years of debt to the State Bar; and she pioneered the recognition of ABA accredited certification programs by the State Bar. The members of the board were inspired by her enthusiasm for the program, her conviction that specialization is a benefit to the citizens of the state, and the fair and compassionate way in which she dealt with both proponents and opponents of specialization.

Since 1996, Sara has served as a State Bar Councilor, providing leadership not only to the board of legal specialization, but to the legal profession throughout the state. She is a frequent lecturer and speaker at bankruptcy institutes and seminars, consistently encouraging newer lawyers to raise their level of competency. It is this spirit of leadership by example and encouragement that led to the establishment of an award in her name.

2006 Recipient of the Sara H. Davis Excellence Award

Maria M. Lynch

Maria Lynch received her law degree in 1979 from the University of North Carolina School of Law. After law school, she clerked for the Honorable J. Dickson Phillips, United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. She currently practices with the firm of Lynch and Eatman in Raleigh. Maria was certified as a specialist in estate planning and probate law in 1997.

Maria has been active in the local, state, and national estate planning bars. She is a Fellow of the American College of Trust and Estates Counsel. This is a prestigious honor as membership is limited to individuals elected by the members of the American College of Trust and Estates Counsel. She also writes regularly on the topic of estate planning. Maria gives of herself and her time to support the organized bar and our profession. She is a member of the North Carolina Bar Association Estate Planning and Fiduciary Law Section where she currently serves as chair of its ethics committee. From 1993 to 2001, Maria was an elected State Bar councilor for the 10th Judicial District Bar. During this time, she also served chair of the Estate Planning and Probate Law Specialty Committee.

A nomination form has this to say about Maria:

She regularly shares her time and expertise with other members of the bar. She will always take a call from a colleague to talk through a tricky issue. When she takes these calls, she selflessly spends as much time as necessary to analyze the problem and resolve the issue. She does so because she believes that as a professional, she is duty bound to help fellow lawyers so that overall legal services to the general public are improved.

The James E. Cross Jr. Leadership Award is presented to a certified specialist who has taken an active leadership role in his/her practice area through presentations at CLE seminars, scholarly writings, participation in groundbreaking cases, or service to an established professional organization.

Jim was among the first to become board certified in residential real property law. Soon after, he agreed to join the Board of Legal Specialization and spearheaded the expansion of the program. He served on the board from 1991 – 1997, assuming a leadership role as Chair for his last three years of service. Jim was known for giving of his time and talent unselfishly and unstintingly. During his service on the board, and under his guidance and direction, two new specialties were added, criminal law and immigration law.

At times Jim had his patience and commitment to the specialization program tested, perhaps most dramatically when the board's proposal to create a certification in personal injury law was defeated during a heated debate of the State Bar Council. But he has remained a staunch and passionate advocate of certifying lawyers as specialists in order to help consumers to identify qualified legal counsel. Jim's dedication and devotion to the specialization program were inspiring. Jim's visionary leadership and wise counsel led to the establishment of this award, in his honor.

2006 Recipient of the James E. Cross Jr. Leadership Award

Joseph B. Cheshire V

Joe Cheshire received his law degree in 1973 from Wake Forest University School of Law and thereafter joined the firm of Ragsdale and Liggett in Raleigh.

In 1978, he formed his own firm, concentrating in criminal law. In the course of the next two decades, he handled scores of first-degree murder cases, both capital and otherwise, tried numerous complex conspiracy cases and political corruption cases, and represented a variety of businesses and business people while being investigated by state or federal authorities. He has represented clients with cases in foreign countries, 16 states, and 84 of the 100 counties in North Carolina. He has handled appeals in all state appellate courts, several federal circuit courts, and the U.S. Supreme Court.

Joe has always been active in the voluntary and regulatory bars. Due to his preeminence in the field of criminal law, he was asked by the Board of Legal Specialization in 1989 to co-chair (with Tommy Manning) the first criminal specialty committee which was asked to establish the standards for certification in criminal law. In this capacity, he also helped to write the first criminal law specialty examination. He served as chair of the committee from 1989 to 1995. He was certified as a specialist in criminal law in 1991.

Throughout his career, Joe has regularly represented indigent criminal defendants who cannot afford to hire their own lawyers, and his service to court-appointed clients continues to this day.

One of nominations had this to say about Joe Cheshire:

I have seen him defend indigent, court-appointed clients as zealously as he defends wealthy, privately retained clients, and I've seen him treat all of them with equal dignity along the way. I regularly see him represent people for free and make fee agreements that basically amount to pro bono work.

Denise Mullen, assistant director of specialization for the N.C. State Bar, graciously provided this information for publication on the NCBA Web site.