

## 2016 Citizen Lawyers: Debra L. Foster

**By Mary Kristen Kelly**

CHARLOTTE – Debra Foster is described by her peers and colleagues as “passionate”, “visionary”, and a “go-to pro bono expert.” Foster is a 2016 Citizen Lawyer Award recipient for these reasons, and for many more. A graduate of the University of North Carolina School of Law, Foster focuses her private law practice on estate planning, estate administration, and tax-exempt organizations matters in Charlotte, North Carolina.

She is a fellow in the American College of Trust and Estate Counsel and has been recognized by Business North Carolina’s Legal Elite, North Carolina SuperLawyers, the Best Lawyers in America, among other groups and publications. However, this Citizen Lawyer Award represents her work outside of her firm, both within the legal profession and beyond.

Trusts and estates work is Foster’s calling because it allows her to fulfill her vision of the role of a lawyer as a counselor at law - a role that she feels is critical but that has faded in today’s legal profession. It allows her to practice within a technical area but to interact with her clients on a more personal level. Currently a partner in Foster Royal, P.A., Foster previously was an equity partner with Parker, Poe, Adams, and Bernstein, an equity partner with Essex Richards, P.A. and a solo practitioner with Debra L. Foster, P.A.

Recognizing the stunning need for greater access to legal services across North Carolina, Foster assisted with the development of and co-chaired in 2011 the North Carolina Bar Association’s Call-4-All (now Lawyer on the Line) program in which volunteer attorneys commit to offering free counsel over the phone once a month. Since the inception of this program, more than 12,000 individuals have received free legal assistance from over 1,000 volunteer attorneys, paralegals, and law students.

Gray Styers of Smith Moore Leatherwood in Raleigh, who was an originator of the Lawyer on the Line program with Foster, describes working with Foster as “being like riding a sled down a sheer cliff: Debra sees the opportunity, takes the initiative, and propels it in the right direction.” Foster served on the Board of Directors of the Legal Aid of North Carolina from 2012 to 2015 and currently chairs the NCBA’s Strategic Planning and Emerging Trends Committee.

Foster is also extremely involved in other community organizations and issues. She sees this as a fundamental obligation, not just of lawyers but of every member of a community. “Every person has an obligation to benefit their community. If you are able, you do what you can,” says Foster.

Holly Welch Stubbing of the Foundation for the Carolinas writes that she is “amazed at Debra’s ability to juggle so many responsibilities outside of her law practice. Her devotion to the philanthropic causes in our community is unwavering.”

Foster’s unwavering devotion to her community is clearly demonstrated through the leadership roles she has held in a wide variety of organizations such as the Women’s Impact Fund (which she helped to found), the American Red Cross, Loaves and Fishes, Children’s Theatre, the Florence Crittendon Service, and the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation.

Without a doubt, through her law practice, her involvement within the profession, and her charitable work, as Rachel Blunk of Sharpless Stavola writes, “Debra has made a profound impact on many North Carolinians.”

*The Citizen Lawyer Committee of the NCBA Young Lawyers Division, in conjunction with the NCBA Citizen Lawyer Committee, provides expanded coverage of the 2016 Citizen Lawyer Awards in recognition of their volunteer service and leadership in their communities and beyond.*

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