

# LegalFront

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## TYLA/ProBAR Help Unaccompanied Children

By Sylvia Cardona

Each year, more than 6,000 unaccompanied children reach the United States border after fleeing abuse, neglect or persecution in their home countries. Approximately 25 percent of those detained children are held in the Rio Grande Valley.<sup>1</sup> This year, the Texas Young Lawyers Association (TYLA) partnered with the South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation Project (ProBAR) to help provide a voice for those children.

Created in 1989 by the State Bar of Texas, the American Bar Association, and the American Immigration Lawyers Association, ProBAR has become an integral part of the legal community in South Texas. It is a national effort to provide legal services to immigrants, including children, who are detained in South Texas. By recruiting, training and coordinating the activities of volunteer attorneys, law students and legal assistants from throughout the country, ProBAR has been successful in winning political asylum cases for minors in detention. However, as the number of detained children rises every year, the need for Texas attorneys to take action increases.

TYLA heard this call to duty when then-TYLA President-Elect, Karin Crump, visited a detention center in Brownsville. "As soon as I arrived at the children's detention center in Los Fresnos, I was overwhelmed by the children's stories. Most had fled horrifying conditions in their home countries, including forced gang involvement, guerrilla war, neglect and sexual abuse. But what they needed more than anything else was for a lawyer to tell their story and give them a chance at life here in the United States. I knew that TYLA could make a difference for those children."

With the assistance of dedicated ProBAR staff, TYLA's mission is to provide wide-spread public awareness to Texas attorneys of the constant need for pro bono services to these children by hosting training sessions throughout the state. The training sessions are approximately four hours long, and all qualifying attendees receive 3.5 hours of free CLE credit.

The attendees learn the reasons why children decide to risk their lives in order to make it to the United States, which include fleeing a harsh life of persecution from gang violence, rape, domestic abuse, neglect, or severe economic hardship; the U.S. agencies involved in the apprehension process; and the immigration court system and types of relief available. More importantly, the attendees will hear of the psychological issues detained children may be facing and will be provided with methods of interaction, which they can apply when working with detained children.

The TYLA/ProBAR committee is currently setting up a database of all interested volunteers. Once ProBAR identifies a child who has a probability of success for relief, the TYLA/ProBAR committee will solicit volunteers from the database. Further, if requested, a volunteer attorney will be paired up with another volunteer to share the case load, travel and administrative proceedings. Reimbursement of reasonable travel expenses are considered on a case by case basis.

Training sessions are being held around the state. Future trainings will be in Brownsville, Dallas, and Houston.

By partnering with ProBAR, TYLA aims to create a pool of volunteer attorneys to assist children who would not have a

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*(From left) Meredith Lusby, ProBAR Director; Karin Crump, TYLA Children's Pro Bono Coordinator; Karin Crump, TYLA President; Martin Valdez, ProBAR Executive Director*



*TYLA/ProBAR training for volunteers in Austin*

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voice but for the commitment of caring lawyers in our state. Diane Eason, ProBAR Children's Pro Bono Coordinator for the TYLA/ProBAR committee aptly captured the spirit of these efforts. "With the unique challenges we face in South Texas—with the largest concentration of unaccompanied minors, yet away from a large pool of attorneys—our agreement with TYLA is highly needed and appreciated. Thankfully, with the great response and interest we have seen so far and the energy and strength of TYLA's membership, I hope that we will have enough volunteers to meet ProBAR's need and serve other unaccompanied children in the state."

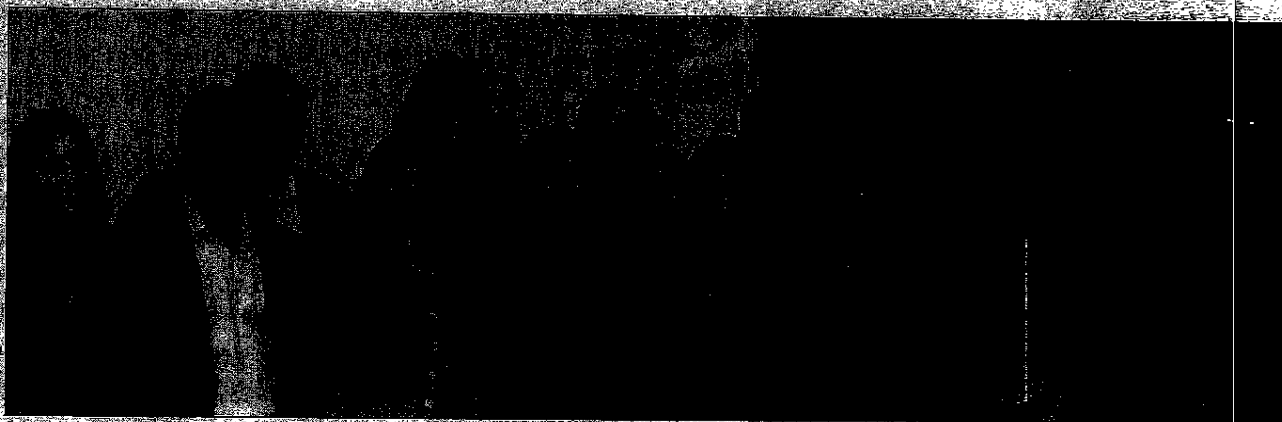
By volunteering for a TYLA/ProBAR case, you might save the life of a child. If your organization is interested in hosting

a TYLA/ProBAR Unaccompanied Children's Project training session, or if it is interested in assisting with the project, please contact the TYLA office at (800) 204-2222 ext. 6429. For further information, please contact Sylvia Cardona at (210) 736-6600 or at [scardona@langleybanack.com](mailto:scardona@langleybanack.com).

Endnote

<sup>1</sup> *Basic Information on ProBAR and Immigration Court Proceedings* in the Harlingen, Texas, District, provided by ProBAR, the South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation Project, updated July 2006.

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*TYLA/ProBAR Committee and ProBAR staff*

## Paralegal Division Honors Exceptional Volunteer

Cecile Wiginton, CLA, Midland, winner of the 2006 Paralegal Division Exceptional Pro Bono Award, is certainly one of the most deserving paralegal volunteers that the Paralegal Division of the State Bar of Texas has ever had.

Wiginton has worked with Legal Aid of Northwest Texas' (LANWT) Pro Bono Clinic at Casa de Amigos in Midland for six years and has been instrumental in recruiting other paralegals and attorneys to donate their time to the clinic as well. LANWT adopted the 2006 Equal Justice Volunteer Program (EJVP) work plan for its 114 county service area. The local office of LANWT serves a six-county area. The 2006 EJVP Plan is a collaborative partnership with bar associations and its members, law firms, law schools, community professionals and public service providers that combine resources to offer a full range of civil legal services to the indigent population.

Local attorneys volunteer to assist clients who cannot otherwise pay for legal services. Wiginton has worked at the clinic doing "intake" for the clients who schedule appointments for the second Tuesday evening of each month. The intake process involves interviewing the prospective client to determine eligibility based on income and determining the exact legal service needed. The file is then taken by a volunteer attorney to do the work needed. The types of cases that LANWT accepts include bankruptcy, consumer law, debt harassment, family law, wills and probate, and other civil matters.

In 2005, Wiginton was asked to serve on the Pro Bono Advisory Board for LANWT EJVP representing various charitable groups, such as Safe Place and Fairhaven and including representatives from the local bar associations. The role of the Advisory Board is to promote private attorney participation,