

# Katahdin Counsel Featured Attorney: Victoria Morales

by Caroline Wilshusen

Victoria Morales is one of 127 attorneys across the state of Maine honored in 2012 by the Katahdin Counsel Recognition Program for her *pro bono* work. Victoria is an associate at Thompson & Bowie, LLP, where she practices in the fields of civil rights and municipal liability, employment, professional liability, and property and casualty defense.

In my capacity as executive coordinator of the Justice Action Group, I met with Victoria to learn more about her *pro bono* activities. It is my sincere hope that her work will inspire other Maine attorneys to follow in her footsteps, and step forward to be recognized as Katahdin Counsel. Look for more interviews with Katahdin Counsel in upcoming editions of the Maine Bar Journal.

## How has your *pro bono* work impacted you?

With the support of my firm Thompson & Bowie, LLP, and the encouragement of the Maine State Bar Association and Judicial Branch, I have been provided support to use my legal skills to greatly improve the lives of many people through *pro bono* activities. I am particularly thankful for the opportunity to engage with the Greater Portland community around the issue of juvenile justice, school suspensions and expulsions, disproportionate minority contact, and substance abuse. Through this community-driven process, we have started the Maine Youth Court (MYC), which has heard eight cases since September 2012.

It is my belief that we all have an important part to play in supporting and improving our communities. I will continue to support MYC as co-chair of the Maine Youth Court Advisory Board.



## How has your *pro bono* work impacted the client(s) whom you served?

MYC is a voluntary diversion program for youth that admit to committing juvenile offenses and school disciplinary infractions from the Greater Portland area to Bath. At the youth court hearing, youth advocates assist respondents in presenting their cases before a student panel of judges, community members, and the victim(s). At the conclusion of the hearing, the respondents receive a disposition tailored towards accountability, competency and skill building, and community safety.

The youth court members are high school students that have completed a 20- to 30-hour training course focused on the juvenile justice system and restorative justice practices. Currently, MYC has trained 26 students and is hearing cases on a monthly basis. MYC takes referrals from juvenile probation officers, police officers, and school officials.

In addition to my work with MYC, I am on the *pro bono* panel at Immigration Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP).

My ILAP work has resulted in helping those persecuted in other countries to seek refuge in the U.S. My clients are now on their way to citizenship, pursuing education and the American Dream with a renewed hope in a world that had been indescribably cruel to them.

## Would you share a client story?

This past year I helped a young man who escaped the brutal killing of his family and members of his social group by Congolese rebels in his home country. He found his way to Rwanda, where despite being homeless, he completed his high school education. His journey eventually let him to Maine, where I helped him obtain asylum. My client is an intelligent, creative, and compassionate young man who inspires each person he meets, including me, to be a better person in this world. This fall he is planning to begin his undergraduate education.



**Caroline Wilshusen** is the Executive Coordinator of the Maine Justice Action Group. A 2007 *cum laude* graduate from the University of Maine School of Law, Ms. Wilshusen also has a child-centered private practice with Chester & Vestal, PA in Portland Maine in the areas of juvenile defense, protective custody, family law and as a guardian *ad litem*. In addition, she is a rostered family mediator for the Maine Court System. Prior to law school Ms. Wilshusen was a mediator for the New York City family courts and victim services.