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## Bar celebrates judicial system achievement

Law Day speaker laments funding cuts that are undermining courts

Aaron Hale  
ahale@gainesvilletimes.com  
770-718-3432  
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Northeast Georgia lawyers, judges and court staff converged outside the courtroom Friday to celebrate the strength of the legal system and also rally against obstacles to justice.

The Gainesville-Northeastern Circuit Bar Association's Law Day banquet, held at the Gainesville Civic Center, brought together a few hundred legal minds under the theme "no courts, no justice, no freedom."

The slogan spotlighted the bar association's concern that government funding cuts to the court system are degrading justice.

"When you look at the criminal justice system, it's true there are major problems. We have a horribly overloaded system," said keynote speaker Edward T.M. Garland, a notable defense attorney from Atlanta.

"To have justice, you have to pay for justice."

The annual Law Day also honored individual contributions to the judicial system.

Sam Harben, a veteran Gainesville lawyer, was given the Judge A.R. Kenyon Award.

It's an honor given to attorney for "excellence in law and dedication to the public good."

Harben was praised for his versatility throughout his career, able to represent clients in education, civil rights and criminal cases.

Brad Morris, the director of the Hall County Public Defender's Office, presented Harben's award.

Morris called Harben a "lawyer's lawyer" and "a great advocate with excellent trial skills."

Mark Ruis, who works in Hall County's Pretrial Services Division, received the Liberty Bell Award. That honor is bestowed on nonlawyers who contribute to the judicial system.

Brett Willis, an attorney in the Hall County Public Defender's Office, said Ruis has a reputation for patience and for treating defendants coming through the system with dignity.

"He's best known for being a master defuser of highly emotional situations," Willis said.

Carla Walker, a lawyer with the Whelchel, Dunlap, Jarrard and Walker firm, was given the Leadership Award.

While most of the ceremony was focused on the positive aspects of work in judicial system, Garland also offered some critiques on the state of the criminal justice system.

Garland, who's probably best known for his defense of NFL stars Ray Lewis and Ben Roethlisberger, blamed an overloaded court system on what he described as overzealous laws on drugs.

There were some uncomfortable looks and antsy shifts in chairs from some attendants during a portion of his speech when Garland suggested loosening those laws to repair the system.

"If we decriminalized and regulated the distribution of drugs, people wouldn't go and break into your homes or break in to kill to get drugs to feed their habits," he said.

But there was also applause as Garland praised state leaders who passed a criminal justice reform bill that targets a reduction in the prison population and offers more money to accountability courts aimed at treating defendants rather than just imprisoning them.

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