

# Law Reader Leads Pro Bono Q&A Site

*Williamsburg attorney hits significant milestone on VSB's Free Legal Answers site*

by Jackie Kruszewski

John D. Williams gets up early — like, 3 a.m. early — to walk his dog.

“I check my messages and this and that,” he says. “And I tend to work in the nice, peaceful, wee hours of the night.”

It's a fitting schedule for what the lawyer calls his “little, quiet practice in rural Williamsburg, Virginia.” And it's also during this time that the attorney logs onto Virginia State Bar's Free Legal Answers service and lends a hand, answering legal questions for the website's low-income users.

In November, Williams became the first Virginia lawyer to answer 50 questions on the platform, and he's completed 56 as of this writing. He says he was inspired to give the website a try after a Virginia State Bar seminar in Hampton last year.

“The program was just interesting to me,” he says. “I'm an old man and technologically challenged, but I can use e-mail. And I figured out how to do this, so I just started doing it in my free time. It's been good fun.”

Williams says, for the most part, the questions concern general, run of the mill topics like divorce, custody, and family law — Williams's areas of expertise. He says he attends to questions where he knows he has a competent, thorough answer.

“I don't get involved in questions where I'm not 100 percent sure of the answers I'm giving,” Williams says. One international custody case, he says, exceeded the scope of the site, and Williams helped flag the posting for moderator intervention and more in-depth help.

“I know people are fearful of going to court,” Williams says. “I like being able to give an accurate answer to people about what I'd expect across the state of Virginia from judges.”



John and Maxine Williams and their dog with the presidential helicopter in 2009.

The Virginia State Bar launched Free Legal Answers in August of 2016, part of a multi-state initiative of the American Bar Association to provide online pro bono civil legal assistance to Virginia residents. Users meet certain income guidelines that qualify them for the help, and Virginia lawyers in good standing can sign up to answer their legal questions.

The program is an opportunity to engage in pro bono on a flexible schedule, and the volunteer lawyers are covered by malpractice insurance provided by the National Legal Aid & Defender Association Insurance Program.

Since its debut, over 70 Virginia lawyers have answered more than 630 questions at [virginia.freelegalanswers.org](http://virginia.freelegalanswers.org).

Williams' prolific participation is an extension of a career focused on

community lawyering and service. In recent years, he's concentrated on being a *guardian ad litem* for children in the courts system. And he's mentored about a dozen law students — from William & Mary and other schools — in his two-decade law career.

He calls the law his third career, a later-in-life pursuit that is more of a passion than a financial necessity. Williams is one of a handful of lawyers in Virginia practicing law without a law degree, having apprenticed under Dwight Dansby in the Law Reader program.

As a Law Reader, an aspiring lawyer can learn the law under a supervising attorney or judge for a set number of years and hours, earning the right to practice, while also accruing experience in a firm or at court. Virginia is one of five states that offer this educational

path. After his apprenticeship, Williams passed the bar on his first try in 1997. “When I first started practicing law, I hung out a shingle and waited for business to walk in the door,” he says. “I did just about everything a brand new, small town lawyer does: divorces, wills, small business formation, etc.”

For seven years, he worked on criminal cases as a court-appointed attorney and did a stint as counsel for the local department of social services. Williams continues to practice on a regular basis in three jurisdictions and makes irregular appearances in four or five other counties.

He says he otherwise keeps a low profile. “I don’t have a Facebook profile;

I don’t have a fax machine. There’s not much out there about me.”

But Free Legal Answers is a rewarding, anonymous way to provide a benefit to fellow citizens who can’t afford to hire counsel, Williams says. Lawyers are “too damn expensive,” he adds.

“I’ve never been a fan of legal fees and I’ve probably cheated my wife of a lot of money,” he says, chuckling.

Outside of the law and early morning walks, Williams enjoys sailing, building and flying airplanes, motorcycling, and traveling. “I’ve been blessed with a wonderful wife with whom I’ve enjoyed many interesting experiences,” he says.

### Top Five Answerers on FreeLegalAnswers.com

**John D. Williams**, Williamsburg – 56 questions answered

**Elaine H. Cassel**, Fairfax – 45 questions

**Ann Callaway**, Fauquier County – 43 questions

**Tammy L. Sossei**, Henrico County – 36 questions

**Martin D. Wegbreit**, Richmond – 30 questions



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[Virginia.freelegalanswers.org](http://Virginia.freelegalanswers.org) — A national ABA-sponsored program bringing legal answers to people who cannot afford an attorney.

Questions? Contact Crista Gantz at [cgantz@vsb.org](mailto:cgantz@vsb.org) or (804) 775-0522.

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