For the Memphis Bar Association and the charitable foundation affiliated with it, 2010 has been a year characterized by service and giving.

That giving has included gifts already extended, such as the Memphis Bar Foundation less than a month ago awarding grants that totaled almost $44,000 to seven local causes – the largest grant amount in the foundation’s history.

The bar association, whose president, Ricky Wilkins, has wanted the group to focus on service, has worked this year with local nonprofit organizations, such as the Mid-South Food Bank and Youth Villages.

“It just pleases me to no end to reach out to the community, number one, and help all the organizations that do great things,” said Shelby County Circuit Court Judge Donna Fields, president of the bar foundation.

“We have Memphis Area Legal Services, and we have other legal clinics that provide access to justice to people who wouldn’t have it otherwise. And we also have encouraged our members to do pro bono work, because there are lots of people who can’t afford lawyers.”

Bucking the recession-driven notion of a foundation cutting back on gift-giving, the bar foundation stepped up its efforts this year for seven grantees.

Four of those include CASA of Memphis & Shelby County Inc. for its volunteer recruitment and training program; Community Legal Center for its Immigrant Justice Program; Exchange Club Family Center for its Safe Exchange/Supervised Visitation Program; and Mediation and Restitution/Reconciliation Services for its juvenile mediation program.

Also receiving grants were Memphis Area Legal Services to expand pro bono and legal clinic outreach; Memphis Bar Association Diversity Committee for the Summer Law Intern Program; and the National Civil Rights Museum to help in its renovation efforts.

Over the years, the Memphis Bar Foundation has supported causes in four main areas that include scholarship, equal access to justice, professionalism and lawyer assistance.

The two service-minded law groups have also spent plenty of time during the year thinking about how their charitable efforts could be extended into next year and beyond.

Anne Fritz, executive director of the Memphis Bar Association, said one of the projects Wilkins has been passionate about this year and that’s nearing fruition is the creation of a “youth court.”

It was created in conjunction with Shelby County Juvenile Court and Memphis City Schools.

The court would be for students who might have violated a school rule that is not serious enough to bring them down to Juvenile Court.

School students then would be trained to act as prosecutors, defense counsel and jurors.
“That would be kind of a way to try to intervene before they get into doing more substantial things,” said Fritz, who added that training for the court is likely to begin soon.

Fields said grants that the Memphis Bar Foundation gives next year will probably include more money to the civil rights museum.

“As I said at the (bar foundation’s annual reception), I know there are very few of us here who could write a check for $43,000,” Fields said.

“But together as an organization, we can give back to the community both in time and money. That’s what we’re doing, and I’m excited about that.”