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NALSD Creates Elder Rights Advocacy Hall of Fame

The National Association of Legal Services Developers (NALSD) announced the creation of an Elder Rights Advocacy Hall of Fame and the Tech Support's Project's own Ellie Lanier was in the first group of inductees. Bill Graham, Legal Services Developer for New York State, made the announcement during an association meeting on October 12, 2007, at the National Aging and Law Conference held in Arlington, Virginia.



Some of the 2007 Elder Rights Advocacy Hall of Famers:
From left: Jim Bergman, Deanna Clingan-Fischer,
Ellie Lanier, and Penny Hommel

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The AARP Foundation is AARP's affiliated charity. Foundation programs provide opportunity, justice and security for older persons in need. Low-income older workers receive the job training and placement they need to re-join the workforce. Free tax preparation is provided for low- and moderate-income individuals, with special attention to those 60 and older. The Foundation's litigation staff protects the legal rights of older Americans in critical health, long-term care, consumer and employment situations. Additional programs provide information, education and services to ensure that people over 50 lead lives of independence, dignity and purpose. Foundation programs are funded by grants, tax-deductible contributions and AARP.

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Bill explained that the Hall of Fame was created using funds donated to NALSD to recognize the advocacy efforts of the late Richard Ingham (LSD-OK). He noted that creating an Elder Rights Advocacy Hall of Fame is a fitting way to recognize those efforts.

The 2007 Class of Inductees, listed below, were recognized for their lifetime achievements:

Richard Ingham (LSD-OK) for his commitment to championing the rights of Older Oklahomans.

Natalie Thomas (LSD-GA) for her significant contributions to justice for older persons in Georgia.

Eleanor Crosby Lanier (AARP) for advancing elder rights at the state and national level.

Deanna Clingan-Fischer (LSD-IA) for creating a strong legal services delivery system in Iowa.

Penelope Hommel & James Bergman (TCSG) for their support and assistance in advancing the creation of legal services delivery systems in all states through The Center for Social Gerontology, Inc.

Deanna Clingan-Fischer was also the recipient of the National Aging & Law Award presented during the National Aging and Law Conference.

For more information on the NALSD Elder Rights Advocacy Hall of Fame, or to contribute to the Richard Ingham Fund, please contact Bill Graham (LSD-NY) at 518-474-0609 or by e-mail at bill.graham@ofa.state.ny.us.

Update on Idaho Model Approaches to Statewide Legal Assistance Project



Background

In May 2006, the Administration on Aging announced a competition for Title IV grant awards for states to develop model approaches for incorporating low-cost legal assistance mechanisms into the state legal services delivery program. The Model Approaches Announcement represented a departure from AoA's past announcements for what have come to be known as helpline grants. AoA Program Announcement and Application noted that:

“AoA sees the low cost delivery models as a critical component in an overall legal delivery system designed to provide maximum benefit from limited legal services resources.”

The application stated the Model Approaches project sought to address the lack of statewide planning and coordination to make the best possible use of the Legal Services Developer, Title IIIB legal services, Title IV low cost delivery models and other resources such as the private bar and law school clinic. The stated purpose of the cooperative agreements, as the funding awards are called, was to “use the leadership of the agency housing the State Legal Services Developer, in partnership with an entity experienced in low-cost delivery mechanisms, to develop models for coordinated statewide delivery systems.” One of the main departures from the old helpline grants is that the applicant/awardee must now be the agency housing the legal services developer, usually the State Unit on Aging, rather than the legal services provider, with the Legal Services Developer becoming the Project Director, rather than the legal services manager.

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It has been a year since the AoA awarded Model Approaches funds through cooperative agreements with the State Units on Aging in Alabama, Idaho, Iowa, Maryland, North Dakota and Virginia. We talked with Rod Gere, Managing Attorney at Idaho Legal Aid Services (ILAS) and its Senior Legal Hotline about progress of the project.

The Idaho Commission on Aging (ICOA) Legal Services Developer, Sarah Scott, serves as Project Director and ILAS is the legal services provider partner for the project. The project goal is to create an integrated, statewide legal services delivery system that will more efficiently serve large numbers of low-income Idaho seniors and related social service organizations;

Among the activities ICOA proposed were:

- a An assessment of the existing legal services delivery system;
- b Re-establishment of the Idaho senior legal hotline;
- c Creation of the nation's first web-based interactive senior legal form library;
- d. Targeting rural, Hispanic and Native American Seniors;
- e. Greater coordination of services between legal services providers;
- f. Development of an outcome measurement system for senior legal delivery.

One of AoA's main objectives in switching the format of the Title IV grants from legal statewide senior legal helplines to Model Approaches cooperative agreement was to promote the integration of cost effective mechanisms into the legal services delivery system, including Title IIIB, LSC, and other non-profit legal providers. We posed the important question of whether increased integration is resulting from the work of the Project. Rod noted that integration within the legal services delivery system in Idaho is easily achieved since ILAS is both the only LSC and Title IIIB provider in the state. The only other free legal services come from the Bar Volunteer Lawyer's Project and University of Idaho College of Law legal clinics. Local Boards of Commu-

nity Guardians rely on volunteers to establish guardianships for incapacitated seniors. Rod believes that the work of the grant has, in fact, enhanced integration among ILAS, the Idaho Commission on Aging and the local Area Agencies on Aging and other providers and agencies, mainly due to the quarterly meetings between the agencies and ILAS as part of the project and the high value the ICOA and the local agencies place on the work of the hotline and other project components.

Status of Project Activities:

(1) Assessment of the existing legal services delivery system:

The Senior Legal Resources Advisory Committee was created for the AoA Project. The Committee includes staff from the Idaho Commission on Aging, ILAS, AARP Idaho, Private bar members, courthouse administrators, judges, Idaho Hispanic Affairs Committee, and representatives from the Nez Perce Tribe. Additionally, Judge Michael Dennard, in his capacity as the Director of the Idaho Court Assistance project, is a member. The Court Assistance Project places court assistance officers in Idaho courts to help unrepresented litigants. Committee members further include representatives from Idaho's local area agencies on aging and a representative from the Idaho Commission on Hispanic Affairs and the Idaho Volunteer Lawyers Program.

The Committee identified five areas where it would like to see improvement in legal services delivery. These are:

- a. Enhanced ability of rural individuals to access legal assistance from their own homes and communities;
- b. As a result of the operation of the Senior Legal Forms Library, local libraries will become an important part of the legal services network;
- c. Extended hours of Hotline operation to include one evening per week will provide senior workers with more access to legal services, (contingent on sufficient

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- grant funding in the third year to fund a paralegal);
- d. Work with the Idaho Volunteer Lawyers Program to offer free *guardian ad litem*, guardian and conservator training classes;
- e. Brainstorm ways to harness efforts of law students to help seniors; Advocate for University of Idaho College of Law to operate a senior law clinic.

The five areas were identified and approved by the Committee. First, each committee member was requested to provide a list of proposed improvements based on their experience working in the senior community. A list was then compiled by Sarah Scott, the Idaho Legal Services Developer, and discussed by the Committee followed by a vote. Discussions included the case priorities of Idaho Legal Aid Services and the Idaho Volunteer Lawyers Program. Those items with the most votes were selected.

(2) Legal Needs Assessment

ILAS is also pursuing a legal needs assessment. ILAS, with input from AARP Idaho and the Commission on Aging, has developed a draft assessment using the Utah Senior Legal Needs Study as a starting point. About 1,700 forms have been sent out and 700-800 have been returned. The 1700 recipients of the Senior Legal Needs Survey had received services from the Senior Legal Hotline in 2006 or 2007. ILAS did not factor income (historically a little over half of the Senior Hotline clients have income in excess of the federal poverty guidelines.) Recipients were selected based on race/ethnicity and geographic distribution. No domestic violence victims were included in the study in order to protect their safety. ILAS wanted to make sure that all non-white callers received the survey. (276 callers) ILAS tried to send surveys to approximately half of the senior callers from each of Idaho's seven judicial districts to ensure they received responses from every part of Idaho. The data is currently being analyzed and ILAS will compile a report on the findings which will be posted on www.legalhotlines.org when complete.

(3) Idaho Senior Legal Hotline

ILAS originally established the senior hotline in April of 2003 with an AoA Title IV legal helpline grant. Once the three year grant cycle ended, ILAS was forced to greatly reduce operation of the senior hotline. The 2006 Model Approaches award enabled ILAS to hire a full time attorney dedicated to staffing the senior hotline. It reopened to full operation at the end of 2006. The hotline attorney is bilingual (Spanish) and handles an average of 7-8 calls daily – a respectable amount for an intensely rural population of less than 200,000 people over age 60. In addition to providing legal advice and intake to the full service local ILAS offices, the attorney sometimes handles brief service matters, especially in the area of consumer issues. She has been successful in negotiating reductions in the amount in controversy for hotline clients.

The Model Approaches award is a three year grant and we asked Rod what plans ILAS had for avoiding the financial loss to the hotline that resulted from the end of the original AoA hotline grant funding. Rod explained that ILAS was pursuing a direct appropriation from the state of Idaho. Such an appropriation would not necessarily be limited to low-income persons. According to Rod, funding for the ILAS' hotlines is a constant problem. Funding the ILAS' two other statewide hotlines: the Domestic Violence Legal Advice Line and the Fair Housing Legal Advice Line, has recently expired. ILAS recently submitted an IOLTA grant application to continue the Domestic Violence Legal Advice Line and is considering a foundation grant to continue the Fair Housing Legal Advice Line.

(4) Senior Form Library

The form preparation aspect for the Model Approaches project is not as far along as the hotline but is progressing. The Senior Legal Resources Advisory Committee chose the forms for automation in the senior form library. Likely forms mentioned in the proposal include advance directives, wills/ estates, collections, guardianships/ conservatorships, property taxes and applications

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for public entitlements. Rod anticipates that the interactive forms will be used independently by internet users. Hotline clients are also sometimes referred to the non-senior specific forms that presently exist on the ILAS website.

(5) Outreach

The Advisory Committee has created a sub-committee to better reach our to Idaho's senior Hispanic and Native American communities. In addition, ILAS conducts outreach through a variety of projects:

1. The Migrant Farmworker Unit has three outreach workers who routinely provide outreach to Idaho's migrant and Hispanic communities. They distribute Spanish and English language Senior Legal Hotline materials at presentations. A majority of their work is in rural agricultural areas in southern Idaho.
2. ILAS has a statewide grant to provide over 200 outreach and education events to community groups regarding domestic violence. Many of these presentations are made in rural areas. Presentation staff distributes Senior Legal Hotline information.
3. ILAS has a statewide fair housing outreach and education grant. Presentation staff distributes information on the Senior Legal Hotline at these events.
4. Presentations for all these grants are routinely made at Idaho's Indian reservations. For example, Pocatello office staff provide presentations for these grants on nearby Shoshone Bannock Reservation. Staff at the Lewiston office make presentations on the Nez Perce Reservation. Coeur D'Alene office staff present at the Coeur D'Alene and Kootenai reservations.

(6) Greater Coordination Among Legal Services Providers

Idaho's main legal services providers for low-income Idahoans are ILAS and IVLP. Both organizations participate on the Advisory Commit

tee. Input from both helped to (1) work with the Idaho Volunteer Lawyers Program to offer free *guardian ad litem*, guardianship and conservator training classes, and (2) brainstorm ways to harness efforts of law students to help seniors and to advocate for the University of Idaho College of Law to operate a senior legal clinic.

Involvement of Idaho's major senior service providers on the Advisory Committee is helping to ensure all understand available legal resources and can provide proper referrals. For example, involvement of Judge Michael Dennard, Director of the Court Assistance Office Project, ensures that Court Assistance Officers in Idaho Court-houses promote those resources, such the Senior Legal Hotline.

ILAS believes that if the University of Idaho College of Law does open a senior legal clinic it will further foster relations between ILAS attorneys and participating law students. ILAS would consider a mentoring program and other collaborations between ILAS attorneys with a senior practice and participating law students.

Additionally, there have been several efforts to increase integration with agencies doing legal work on behalf of seniors. Particularly, an ILAS attorney is working with a local grandparent group and the KinCare Committee to address grandparent issues.

There is also a lot more collaboration on the local level between area agencies on aging and ILAS.

(7) Outcome Measurement for Senior Legal Delivery

The Senior Legal Hotline attorney mails satisfaction surveys to hotline callers when mailing other materials. Clients who are provided extended representation by other ILAS staff are mailed a different survey once their representation is completed. There is as yet no report on results.

Update on North Dakota Model Approaches to Legal Assistance Project



The Aging Services Division of the North Dakota Department of Human Services was a 2006 awardee of the Model Approaches to Statewide Legal Assistance program. The legal services provider partner is Legal Services of North Dakota (LSND) which is the sole LSC funded program in the state. It has also been the sole Title IIIB legal services provider in North Dakota for over 20 years.

Lynne Jacobson, the Elder Rights Administrator and Legal Services Developer at the North Dakota Aging Services Division, serves as the Project Director. Richard LeMay, Director of Litigation, oversees the Project at LSND.

Other project participants include the ND Civil Legal Assistance Program of the Bar Association, the University of North Dakota School of Law Clinic Education Program, Community Access Television, the Immigration Law Advisory Counsel, Tribal Judges, the Long Term Care Ombudsman, Protection and Advocacy, and the Human Services Center.

Objectives of the North Dakota Model Approaches project include:

1. Coordination of the efforts of all the legal services providers (Title IIIB, LSC, Bar, and UND clinic);
2. Expansion of staffing for the senior legal hotlines;
3. Telephone access to all senior legal services programs;
4. Addition of expertise in Native American and Immigration Law to the senior legal services and promotion to special populations;
5. Expansion of the pro bono and reduced fee services of the Bar;
6. Conduct a Legal Needs Survey;
7. Outcome measurement.

1. Coordination of Legal Services and Office on Aging

We talked to Rich LeMay at LSND to check on progress of the Model Approaches project. With regard to the broad AoA goal of promoting integration between the Office on Aging and the provision of legal services in the state, Rich believes this was happening to a large degree even before the Model Approaches award since LSND was the only Title IIIB provider in the state. Rich believes that the Model Approaches award has been a good vehicle to improve relations with various groups. LSND has had the statewide Title IIIB grant and an elder law component for decades. LSND has also been involved with the state Human Service Centers for many years.

The award has helped LSND staff to attend more meetings, provide more community education with local area agencies on aging and help LSND become more visible at the Department of Human Services. Rich serves as a member of Joint Civil Legal Services to the Poor Committee.

In an effort to establish awareness for the Model Approach Project, LSND has met with a number of statewide organizations including Protection and Advocacy, Council on Abused Women Services and the State Bar Association. Most importantly it has allowed LSND to do more senior law cases.

2. Increase Staffing for Senior Legal Hotline

Given the large geographic area, rural population, and lack of public transportation, access to legal services by telephone was a necessity in North Dakota, particularly for seniors. To address that need, LSND had been using part of its Title IIIB allotment to fund a telephone access line, staffed by a paralegal. One of the main benefits of the award was to increase the staffing for the senior legal hotline and this has been accomplished. With the funds, LSND was able to hire an additional part time intake paralegal, bringing hotline paralegal staffing to 1.5 FTEs and was also able to increase attorney staffing for the hotline to 1 FTE. Seniors can call either a

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special number for seniors or the Central Intake number for LSND. The calls are all picked up by an experienced paralegal. The paralegal takes down pertinent information and assesses the problem. If the issue is something which the paralegal feels competent to answer, she may provide immediate legal advice, with attorney review subsequent to the call. More often, the paralegal will consult with an attorney about the case and give the client advice after the consultation. She may call the client back with the advice or the client may be left on hold, at the client's preference. Although the final yearly tally of clients coming through the senior hotline has not been made, it is clearly running higher than the same period-to-date last year.

3. Telephone Access to All Senior Legal Services

The Senior Legal Hotline effort to provide one stop access to full LSND services as well as to the State Bar pro bono and low fee panels has developed very well under the Project. The paralegal treats each call as a possible application for extended services for LSND. Case files for clients meeting acceptance criteria are transferred via case management software to their local LSND offices.

The hotline paralegal and attorney first look at whether LSND can handle the case and, if not, the paralegal will try to fit them into the state bar pro bono or low fee panel. The process of transfer is seamless as the Bar and LSND are able to transfer data through their database systems.

The goal of seamless access to the Law School has not developed to the point that the Project participants had expected. Because of personnel changes at the Law School, the clinic has not been able to participate as hoped. The commitment to include the law school as a partner still exists and efforts to reach that goal will continue.

4. Special Populations

LSND has allocated an additional ½ FTE paralegal and ½ FTE attorney with expertise in Native American and Immigration law to handle senior hotline calls. LSND has developed outreach bro-

chures tailored to Native American and immigrant populations describing legal services available to them. These are distributed through numerous outreach venues and on the LSND website. Rich believes there has been some increase in calls from these groups due to the outreach effort.

5. Pro Bono/Reduced Fee Expansion

Rich explained that before the institution of the Model Approaches Project, the funding allocated by LSND for private attorney participation was mainly used for LSC-type cases. As a result of the Project, more pro bono attorneys are handling cases for seniors, such as Powers of Attorney and simple wills.

6. Legal Needs Survey

The University of North Dakota School of Law spearheaded the legal needs assessment through a survey that was sent to seniors, low income North Dakotans and Native Americans. Law school clinic students, volunteers from a senior volunteer program and LSND employees also did interviews at assistance centers and community events. 659 assessments were completed and interns at the Law School tabulated the results. The needs of elderly respondents were tabulated separately. The predominant issue cited by the senior respondents were situations where the individual could not handle his own affairs. (13.5%). (Please see www.legalhotlines.org for a copy of the Report).

7. Outcome Measurement

LSND is presently implementing the LSC changes to its Case Services Reporting system. Rich anticipates the changes to the reporting system will make it easier to track and report all cases.

The main benefit of the Model Approaches award is the opportunity to collaborate with the different entities involved. According to Rich, "It will go a long way to provide contact and availability for many years after the grant. The grant certainly provides more services but the greater benefit will be long term collaboration."



California Senior Legal Hotline

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Hotline Mediator Helps California Senior Succeed after Impasse

By Ellen Yamshon*

Candace's experience at the California Senior Legal Hotline's telephone mediation program was so positive that she now volunteers there weekly; shortly after settling her complaint she started assisting with administrative tasks, then quickly saw that she could offer more, using her experience to inspire fellow seniors to learn how to solve their own disputes.

Now, Candace is training as a case developer and observing experienced mediators conduct telephonic mediations.

Here's Candace's story:

She bought a top-of-the-line refrigerator that simply did not work from the start. Her frustration grew as repair after repair was made, but still the unit malfunctioned. The repairmen were rude and insulting. They needled Candace as if it were her fault that food was spoiling.

The food box and freezer thermostats registered at the proper temperatures, zero and 40 degrees Fahrenheit, respectively. But the ice cream was still soupy and the hydrator compartments were not cold enough to prevent spoilage. Fresh vegetables were rotting at a furious rate. She was composting faster than she could stock her refrigerator. The compressor was replaced after the fourth service call, but still the food was warm. The unit was under warranty, so there was never a charge for parts or labor, but Candace finally gave up on servicing the appliance, since it was obvious she was not going to get it to work properly.

**Ellen is Director of Mediation at the California Senior Legal Hotline; This article is based an interview conducted this past spring by Muriel Brounstein, a volunteer mediator at the California Senior Legal Hotline .*

She asked the dealer to take back the refrigerator and either replace it or refund her money. She was told the sales contract specifically provided for repair, not replacement. Candace contacted the manufacturer and was rebuffed there, too.

Caught in an endless loop of frustration and hollow attempts by the dealer and the manufacturer to rectify her problem, Candace sought the help of the California Attorney General's Office, which referred her to the Bureau of Electronics and Appliance Repair, a division of the California Department of Consumer Affairs.

Her complaint languished for nearly six weeks and was finally rejected because "sales and installation issues were outside their jurisdiction."

Candace tried everything she could think of. She wrote letters. She made phone calls. She told her story to whoever would listen. In desperation, Candace contacted a local television station with a high profile program that investigates and broadcasts consumer complaints. It was a drastic step for Candace, because she shies away from controversy and public displays. The television station call center contacted the dealer and manufacturer, to no avail.

Then Candace remembered she had heard about the California Senior Legal Hotline in a class she took at Sacramento State University a few years ago. (Candace participates in the Sixty-Plus Program, which offers residents aged 60+ discounted academic credit courses.) She called and conferred with an advocate, who heard Candace's story and advised her about possible options, one of them a suggestion that she try the hotline's mediation service.

Why didn't the advocate go to bat directly for Candace? It appeared Candace was stuck with the lan-

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guage of the sales contract: “Customer’s sole and exclusive remedy is for factory specified parts and repair labor to correct defects in materials or workmanship.” But what about the implied warranties of merchantability and fitness for a particular purpose?

Candace could have sued since California law prohibits waiver of the implied warranty of merchantability but she had come to realize that she didn’t want to suffer through a legal process. She had had her fill of posturing and wrangling. She couldn’t bear more accusations of failing to operate or maintain the unit properly.

Because Candace stated she wanted to solve the problem on her own, the mediator never invited the dealer or manufacturer to participate in mediation.

The hotline mediator placed herself in the role of negotiation coach and worked with Candace to analyze the conflict systematically, to discuss Candace’s interests and the interests of the adverse parties (something disputants often fail to consider) and explore alternative ways to settle the dispute.

Candace reported that she felt better about herself and the conflict after she spoke with the hotline mediator. The mediator had really listened to her story and at the same time made her consider the other side’s arguments. Moreover, Candace appreciated that the mediator didn’t blame her for her dilemma; the mediator was understanding and supportive without being partial to Candace.

Having learned how to negotiate gently but firmly by thoroughly preparing her case and presenting the consequences of impasse. Candace proceeded without the mediator’s intervention and negotiated a brand new refrigerator with the manufacturer, although not the same model as the first.

She got the name of the director of customer relations from a customer satisfaction survey that had been mailed to her on three occasions but which she had not returned. She decided to send the survey back with a blistering letter about what a travesty it is to force a customer to keep a non-functioning, defective appliance. This was the winning argument.

By her own admission, Candace is not a fighter; she prefers being soft spoken and nice even when she’s mad or disappointed. “The mediator did more than provide support, make phone calls and follow up. She listened to what I had to say and paid attention to how I dealt with conflict.”

“At one point I told her that I didn’t know how to fight. She told me, ‘You can learn.’ I would say that she empowered me to be strong enough to continue until I got satisfaction.”

Candace reports that the refrigerator model she originally bought is no longer being manufactured because “they didn’t have the right to sell something that didn’t function properly from the start.”

For a description of mediation at the California Senior Legal Hotline see Mediation at a Legal Hotline, p.11, Legal Hotline Quarterly, Issue # 38, Summer, 2006.

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From the Frontline

A Real Smile

*By Deborah Marshall**

My life has had many twists and turns, just like anyone else's, but to understand why I am so grateful to be working as an intake paralegal requires a look back into the past. As an intake worker I am required to get the clients' financial and personal information to determine eligibility for Legal Aid Services. Sounds simple and uncomplicated enough but the hard part is not getting the amounts, dates, and addresses. The hardest part for me is listening to the clients' stories and in most cases being able to help and in others not being able to. The big turning point in my life came when I was doing an application for a client regarding a domestic violence issue. She had stated that her husband had tied her to a cabinet in her kitchen and had left her there with their two year old child. He was gone for hours and the child was screaming and crying because she could not get loose to take care of him. In most domestic violence cases I complete the intake and send it to my managing attorney to review. She then sends it to our domestic violence intake worker who gives the client information on how to leave and what options that are available for her. This time it was different. It was not the first domestic violence case that I had gotten information for and unfortunately it will not be my last; however, it was unique to me. Sometimes I wonder how we do all of this and manage to still smile at the end of each day, especially those who deal only with the domestic violence cases. It still amazes me how just listening to others stories can make you feel grateful for what you have and then wretched inside for them all at the same time. I guess my emotional tie to the domestic violence clients is what makes the work more meaningful to me.

When I heard this woman's story it broke loose memories of a life that I would rather forget. I remember glancing up at the mirror, eyes swollen and red from all the tears that I had cried. I carefully wiped the blood from my nose and cheek. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, and looked back at

**Deborah Marshall is an intake paralegal at Southwest Virginia Legal Aid Society*

the mirror at the image that was no longer the girl that I had been a year ago. I forced a weak smile across my lips and continued on with my day. This was a typical day in my life four years ago. I had been in an abusive relationship for six years when one day God decided to take my abuser from this earth. If he was still alive I would probably still be there, dying slowly, bit by bit, every day. It is hard to look back at those painful memories, that for a long time I managed to lock tightly in the corner of my mind. Without them I would not be able to tell my story properly.

July 24th 1993 was the day that my life changed, the day that I actually began living my adult life as a normal woman. After the initial shock wore off and a few months had passed, I was contacted by an attorney from the local Legal Aid Office. She had been handling a Social Security case for my late husband. I quickly told her that he had passed away as I proceeded to tell her what had happened. She must have heard the anxiety that I was trying to hide in my voice because at that moment she said, "What are you planning on doing now?" I was silent for a moment because, to be honest, I hadn't thought about it. I said "Well, you know I always wanted to work in the law field?" She simply said "Well, now is a good time to do it." Such a simple statement from a stranger that I had never personally met struck me with such intensity that within the next few days I applied for college.

I began college the following fall semester. I managed to raise my daughter and go to school with no problems at all. After all, this was easy compared to what my life had been. I graduated with a paralegal degree in August of 2006. I was the first of my family to graduate from college. It seemed that my previous life was just a dream, or a nightmare, to be more honest. It seemed that it hadn't even occurred. Sometimes I still try to figure out where I was then. It was as if I had locked myself in this place in my mind. When I was set free I left all the memories and pain there. That had become my imaginary life. Not that it was a bad thing, but not confronting your fears when they are presented to you seems to make it worse the longer they stay hidden.

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In July of 2006, I had interned for a distinguished attorney in our area and his assistant knew that I wanted to work for Legal Aid, simply because the legal aid attorney had guided me into the life I was now living. She had e-mailed me a newspaper clipping about a position opening at the local Legal Aid Office. I had not reached my main goal of becoming an attorney yet but I decided to apply for the job for an intake paralegal. Needless to say I got the job and could not be happier with my decision to apply. I love my job. Not only does it help me support my family, which now consists of a wonderful man and three beautiful kids, but also it brought me closure that was long overdue.

I lived inside my own fears for all these years and it took this job to make me realize that I still had not become who I wanted to be. When the client I mentioned earlier cried into the phone and asked me to help her, I could hear myself in her voice. I held my composure for the intake. I then went to the bathroom, locked the door, and broke down. I had never been tied to a cabinet but had been locked in a room with my child for hours. I guess the association made it all real again. I stood there for a good ten minutes just crying silently. I regained my composure and walked over to the mirror. I glanced up at the mirror, eyes swollen and red from all the tears that I had cried. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, and looked back at the mirror at the image that was no longer the woman that I had been a three years ago. I didn't have to force a smile this time; it was just there, a real smile. I knew at that moment that I was where I was supposed to be, that this is the job that I was supposed to do, and that things do change. That is a good thing. My life is a wonderful example that things happen for a reason. Sometimes you don't know what that reason is but if you give it time you will. I can now tell my clients that they can change their lives and know, from experience, that it is true.





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