

Legal-aid agency celebrates 40 years of justice for all

By LISA Thompson

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Erie County Legal Services helped clear the path to Thelma Grady's future when a divorce left her alone at age 40 with six children and mounting financial problems that were no fault of her own. At the end of her work career many years later, the legal-services agency -- now called Northwestern Legal Services -- came to her aid again. It obtained disability benefits for the damage done to her legs and shoulders by 25 years of standing on concrete floors and manually pressing clothes at a dry-cleaning shop.

"God knows what would have happened," Grady said. "There was nowhere else to turn."

Laws are there to protect people like Grady. 77. But she, like many others, did not have the means to enter and navigate the justice system.

Grady, a first client of what would become Northwestern Legal Services and a longtime member of its board of directors, will be among the crowd that gathers tonight at the U.S. District Courthouse in Erie to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the agency's founding.

The surviving members of the original group of 38 incorporators will be honored at the private ceremony, which will be highlighted with a new video that documents the agency's origins.

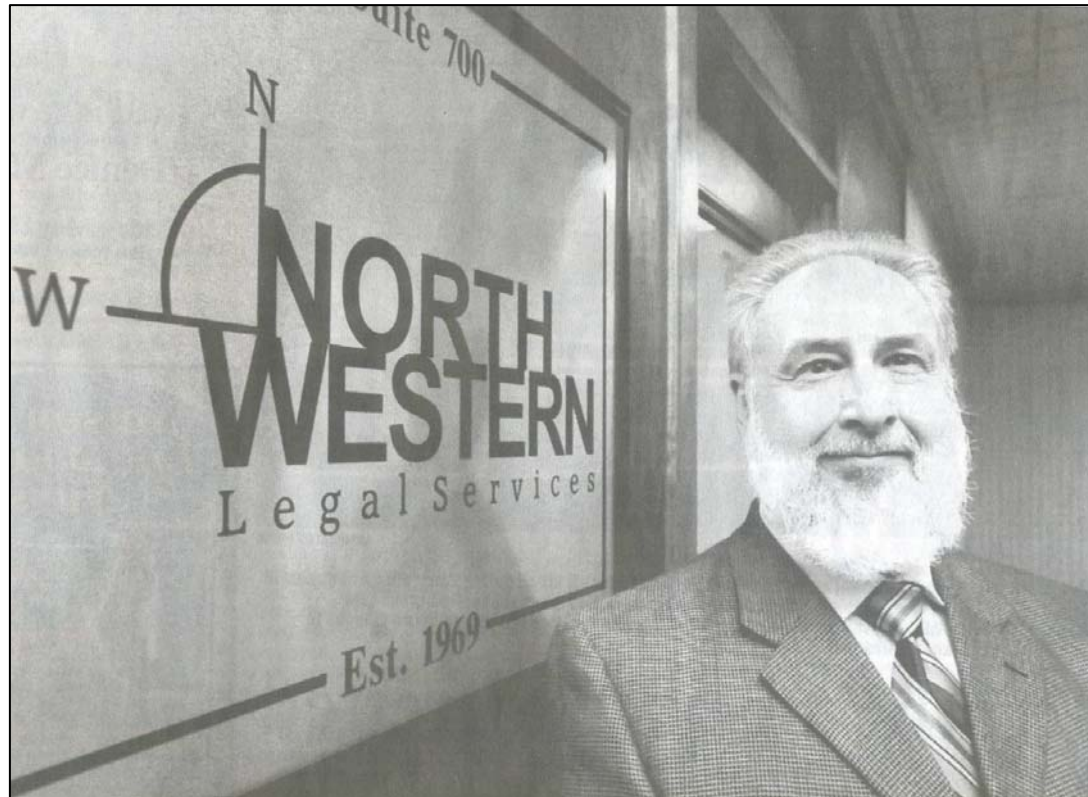


Much has changed since those early days, when Grady sought help at Erie's law office for the poor.

Staff no longer type legal briefs onto carbon paper or do their research in heavy law books.

In the 1970s, the "law van" -- a camper turned law office -- toured rural northwestern Pennsylvania to educate the public. Today, Executive Director Robert A. Oakley offers legal guidance with his show "Access to Justice" on radio and public-access television. Government restrictions have limited the types of services the agency can offer. The central mission, however, remains the same: Giving the poor access to justice.

"I just hope they realize what a great thing they did for the Erie community," said Jen Fisher, a 29-year-old Northwestern Legal Services staff attorney in Erie. "If they had not done it, who knows when it might have been done or by whom."



The 'right thing'

In the 1963 case *Gideon v. Wainwright*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that poor defendants charged with a serious crime had a constitutional right to be represented in court by a lawyer, even if they could not afford one.

There is no such constitutional mandate for helping poor people confront civil legal problems.

In Erie County, local officials decided to create an agency to provide that service free to the poor, not because it is required by law, but because, as former Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge said in the new legal-services video, it was the "right thing" to do.

Erie had enjoyed a long tradition of providing free legal help to the poor

through the donated or pro bono services of local lawyers. But as the 1970s approached, some local lawyers noticed an emerging nationwide trend toward so-called legal- services law offices dedicated to helping the poor handle civil cases.

Many in the Erie County Bar Association supported the idea of creating a legal-services office in Erie. Others did not. They believed the needs were already being met, and that such an office might take away business from practicing attorneys, said Edward W. Goebel, 70, one of the founding incorporators of Erie County Legal Services.

Goebel belonged to a team of local lawyers who set aside a few evenings a week at local community centers like the John F. Kennedy Center to gauge the community's legal needs. They were inundated with clients seeking help with credit and family and landlord-tenant problems.

Convinced of the need for a legal-aid agency, in June 1969, the 38 local lawyers incorporated Erie County Legal Services. The name was changed in 1974 to Northwestern Legal Services when Congress established Legal Services Corp., a private, nonprofit corporation that helps fund legal-services agencies.

Northwestern Legal Services, based in the Renaissance Centre, 1001 State St., eventually expanded across 10 northwestern Pennsylvania counties. Supported by state,



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Northwestern Legal Services used its "law van," a mobile law office, in the 1970s to reach out to poor, rural clients in need of legal help.

AGENCY CELEBRATES 40 YEARS OF SERVICE

Northwestern Legal Services will celebrate its 40th year of legal service for the poor in a private celebration tonight at the U.S. District Courthouse in Erie. The original 38 lawyers who signed the documents to incorporate the agency in 1969 will be honored with a new video that documents Northwestern Legal Services history. For more information on Northwestern Legal Services, call 452-6949 or to go www.nwls.org. Its main office is in the Renaissance Centre, Suite 700, 1001 State Street.

federal and private funds, it now has satellite offices in Meadville, Franklin, Bradford, Warren and Farrell.

In 2007, the offices closed 4,800 civil cases on behalf of indigent clients. Eligible are clients who earn 125 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines. In January, that was about \$13,538 a year for an individual.

The founders, Goebel said, were not, to be clear, a bunch of radical lawyers intent on social upheaval.

"It was not liberal or conservative or Republican or Democratic," he said of the impetus for legal services in Erie County.

"Just the opposite," he said. "It was a broad spectrum of the Bar Association."

The founders, he said, "wanted to see the rule of law applied." "If you believe in the rule of law and that people should live by the rule of law, you have to allow everyone to have some redress for their grievances." 'A political football'

Kathy Landis, 56, and James Montero, 62, watched the agency evolve in their 30-plus years of service. In its heyday, Northwestern Legal Services employed 68, almost twice as many as today, said Landis, an administrative assistant hired 36 years ago. Staff commonly worked until early dawn. "We were able to take every kind of case, as long as the person was eligible," she said. "It was the most rewarding time to be a part of that."

Montero, a paralegal, in the 1970s ferried information about workers' rights, minimum wage and housing to migrant workers encamped in rural Erie County farms. He now helps clients with Social Security Disability Insurance and unemployment-compensation claims.

"The people we represented were just wonderful. It changed their life and outlook on life," Landis said.

Over time, legal-services offices have been subjected to movements that sought to limit the services they could provide. A 1995 position paper outlining ideological objections to legal-services operations is still posted on the Web site of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. The authors call legal services "the legal pillar of the welfare state."

Northwestern Legal Services represented inmates in court action on Erie County Prison overcrowding in 1982, winning a consent decree in federal court that imposed population limits in 1983. That kind of case would not be possible now, Oakley said. The list of restrictions he must observe goes on for pages.

"We've been a political football forever," Oakley said.

Under these pressures, legal-services organizations were forced to prioritize the cases they would take. Oakley and Montero now aim to help as many people as they can even if they cannot actually provide them with legal representation. They offer telephone advice and clinics to teach people how to represent themselves in certain types of cases.

"A better-educated community is a better community," Oakley said.

The future

It takes a special kind of lawyer to make a career out of representing the poor.

Oakley, 62, has spent his entire legal career advocating for the underprivileged. Photos of blues artists and a provocative statement of solidarity from union leader and Socialist Eugene Debs decorates his wall: "While there is a lower class, I am in it. Where there is a criminal element, I am of it. While there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

Oakley worries when he looks at his staff and sees only a handful of young people coming up the ranks.

He's placing his hope in staffers like Fisher, a University of Californiaâ€"Davis law school graduate, who gave up a job with a personal-injury firm in Erie to help the poor.

"The No. 1 difference here, is if we don't help our clients, nobody is going to help them," said Fisher, who joined Northwestern Legal Services three years ago.

Oakley would like to pay lawyers like Fisher more -- at least, he said, to place them on the pay scale of assistant prosecutors and public defenders. His employees still start below \$40,000, while assistant prosecutors and public defenders generally start above that.

He and Fisher said there is a growing movement nationwide to support law school graduates who go into public service. They also hope President Barack Obama's administration will consider rolling back the restrictions on the kinds of cases they can tackle.

"If people do not have access to legal redress, they might as well have no rights at all," Oakley said.
