

A New Career in Legal Aid

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**The mass of men
lead lives of quiet
desperation.**

— Henry David Thoreau

After a year of working in legal aid, this I can well believe. For four years after law school, I worked in the courteous and just, but sometimes sterile, world of law clerks and judges. Last year, looking for a change of pace, I took a job with Legal Aid in rural Missouri. One other attorney and I cover 13 counties, and generally practice landlord-tenant, domestic, welfare benefits, unemployment compensation, social security, civil rights, health, school and consumer law. Thankfully, my fellow attorney has done this job for over 17 years and does it well. Our farthest territory is over two hours away and we are the only legal-services provider in the area. Although the job requires a great deal of driving, often through impoverished areas, the countryside is quite beautiful.

My advice to law students? If you want to work in legal aid, be sure to participate in the Legal Aid Clinic while you are still at Notre Dame. You will be very glad you did on your first day in court. I did not. If student loans or other interests will probably preclude you from doing this as a career, the Notre Dame Legal Aid Clinic can provide you with a chance to experience this personally rewarding work without sacrificing the "big money" (or at least, financial solvency), will provide you with excellent courtroom training opportunities, and will remind you of the quiet desperation of poverty.

I have just finished writing a brief for a severely diabetic woman who is rapidly losing what remains of her vision and all feeling in her feet, but who was denied Medicaid because she insists on maintaining a very-low-income, part-time job at a local fast-food restaurant. Her employer cannot allow her to work more than three hours a day. She must take a taxi — the only public transportation in her town — to work, and the ride costs her three dollars each way. She cannot afford to test her blood sugar, and she must reuse her needles for insulin injections, risking blood poisoning with every dose. Whatever the quality of my brief, I cannot feel bad about presenting such a case to a

judge. This, truly, is one of the rewards of my job: The demand for free legal services is such that we must take only the truly sympathetic cases — a luxury not often found elsewhere in the practice of law.

Practicing law in a small town is a kinder, gentler practice, and we often receive thank-you cards from our clients. The pace is hectic, however, and the clients' stories sometimes break your heart: the 65-year-old gentleman who lives in a school bus heated by kerosene, feeds the local stray cats because he "couldn't let them starve," and dreams of a day that he may have the wherewithal to visit his only remaining brother, who lives in a nursing home 60 miles away; the beautiful young woman who was found naked in her trailer several days after she tried to kill herself with a bottle of pills and whose 20-year-old husband sits in prison for having broken her ribs with his steel-toed boots while his girlfriend held her down; the nice, but simple, young man with severe epilepsy who kept his condition under control and worked night and day for 15 years until one day he got the flu, vomited up his medicine, had a *grand mal* seizure and lost his job, his wife, his children, his life.

Legal aid is not for the pale-hearted or inflexible, but can be incredibly rewarding work. I never know what sort of case will come through the door — often a person with pleadings in hand and a court hearing on the docket that day. And the work is never boring. Becoming involved in the work of the Legal Aid Clinic may be just the opportunity to test your temperament. In fact, during my travails this past year, I have often wished that I had taken advantage of the wonderful resources available through the supervising attorneys at the Legal Aid Clinic rather than being forced to learn the hard way — on the job.

Like many students who come to Notre Dame Law School, I always knew that I wanted to work in legal aid someday. And like many who ultimately seek more financially secure employment, I too believed that my student loans and financial circumstances would preclude that dream for many years. Last year, however, the Notre Dame Law School changed all of that. The Law School has been able to assist me financially, which in turn, has given me the opportunity to realize my dream of working in legal aid long before I had ever hoped. The Law School has helped me help others — which reaffirms something I have always known: Notre Dame is a very special place with a very special mission.

