

# A Student's Reflection on Legal Aid

BY COLLEEN M. MORRISSEY '92, '97 J.D.

I was one of those young, ambitious, slightly naive law school applicants who believed that attending law school would provide me with the knowledge and training I needed to go out and really make a difference in my community. (That may even be a quote from my application to law school.) I have always had a rather idealistic view of the legal profession — words like truth, justice, honor and fair-dealing come to mind. These sound like such dramatic concepts, but I know that they are not just concepts because I saw them every day in the lawyers, the staff and the other student interns with whom I worked at the Notre Dame Legal Aid Clinic.

I participated in the clinic during my third year of law school and consider it the most valuable and rewarding experience of my three years. It was while working in the clinic that I realized I could incorporate the ideals that first led me to law school into the practical everyday work I would be doing as a lawyer — regardless of the type of law I practiced or where I chose to practice.

There are many reasons I found working in the clinic to be such a rewarding experience, but first and foremost, it was because of the supervising attorneys and staff who give so much of themselves to the Law School, the students, and most importantly, to the clients. As student interns starting with the clinic, we went through a series of workshops, each focusing on a different topic or skill that would be important to our work at the clinic and to our ability to serve the clients. One such workshop that stands out in my mind was dedicated to the art of interviewing a new client. It was by example that I learned the importance of listening, and consequently, began to understand that sometimes, the best way to serve clients is simply by providing a comfortable environment in which they can communicate the problem or situation that first brought them to the clinic. Sitting beside my supervising attorney and observing how he or she invoked the trust and confidence of a new client was a learning experience I never would have discovered inside a classroom.

The guidance and support of the supervising attorneys are a constant throughout each case or representation of a client. But clearly, the best way to learn is to do — so student interns are given a lot of responsibility from the very beginning. Since no two clients or situations are identical, each student intern's experience with the clinic is somewhat unique. Some of my experiences included meeting and talking with clients, negotiating with opposing counsel and administrative agencies, representing clients at hearings, arguing motions, and questioning and cross-examining witnesses — to name just a few.

While not all of the cases on which I worked turned out favorably, I did have

the opportunity to feel the satisfaction and pride that comes with an accomplished objective or a favorable decision for a client. One example concerned an older woman who came to the clinic because she had been unable to secure a loan to have her leaky roof fixed. Apparently, there was a problem with the title to her home and the lender would not provide her with assistance until she could clear up the problem. Well, she had no idea what needed to be done or how to go about doing it, so she came to us for legal advice and assistance. It turned out to be a minor problem that required a few telephone calls and a little persistence to clear up. Getting a loan to fix a leaky roof may not seem like a big deal, but it was very important to her since winter was coming and she did not have a good roof over her head. I will never forget my client's voice when I called her to let her know the problem had been cleared up, the loan was going through, and she would have her roof fixed by Christmas. She was thrilled. Helping this woman with her problem did not require a great deal of legal expertise; however, as I learned from my work at the clinic, a big part of being a good lawyer has nothing to do with the substantive law — it is simply knowing how to be a good problem-solver.

While some clients came and went quickly, there were other clients with whom I worked throughout the entire school year. One such client was a young mother who had lost custody of her baby to the baby's father. She came to the clinic to ask for help in increasing her visitation with her baby. Since there was no visitation agreement in place, her visits had been sporadic at best. Prior to our involvement in the case, she had no representation and no meaningful support from family or friends. It was a long road — one that she and the clinic are still traveling. However, we were able to get her case back in front of the judge and reach at least a preliminary agreement with more regular visitation between her and the baby. It was a small but meaningful victory for our client. The clinic really was the only place for this young mother to turn when she needed help, and I am very happy that we were able to be there for her. When we began representing her, I was simply her lawyer. But as time passed, I also became her confidante and advisor — something she needed even more than she needed a lawyer.

I am one person who worked for one school year at the Notre Dame Legal Aid Clinic. My contributions were very few compared to the many provided by other people who have committed a large portion of their life's work to the clinic. But the experiences I had and the people I met while working at the clinic have helped shape who I am and who I want to be — both as a person and as a lawyer.