

ND legal aid clinic opens office away from campus

By Mike Magan

When one thinks of the University of Notre Dame, images of a beautiful campus, the Golden Dome and Touchdown Jesus come to mind.

But Notre Dame's rich tradition and towering Gothic buildings can be intimidating to those who have never stepped foot on a college campus.

Notre Dame Law School officials decided the unique qualities that usually draw people to their campus were actually pushing away clients the school's legal aid clinic were looking to help.

So, because of its growing case load and popularity among the law students, school officials decided to open up a second office away from the hallowed halls of Notre Dame.

The Howard and St. Peter Street clinic is used to give students experience in dealing with the court system while providing legal services to area residents who otherwise couldn't afford it.

Clinic co-director and faculty member Eileen M. Doren is in her fourth year of service to the clinic and thinks the new office couldn't have opened at a better time.

"Notre Dame is a difficult place to get around," Doren said. "I think the law school itself is somewhat an imposing structure, and the university can be intimidating. Most of our clients have had no other reason to come to a university."

Doren can recall struggling to give clients directions, some of whom couldn't read, to weave through the campus and find the clinic.

"There's hardly a place to park, and once they do park, they don't know how close or far away they are," Doren said. "It was a nightmare trying to give them instructions when I didn't even know which side of the campus they will be entering from."

Even though the new office is only four or five blocks away from campus, it's bigger and easier to find and located right on the metro bus-line.

Law school dean David Link said an additional office was needed for both the

students and the clients.

"The reason for opening another office was a combination of needing more space because there were more students interested in legal aid work, and it is a better way to serve the community," Link said.

According to Link, the clinic has seen a large increase in immigration work because of the many fruit-picking jobs available in the area. Link says Mexican immigrants are attracted to the low-wage jobs.

"There's a surprising amount of immigration work we have here," Link said. "Some of these people have been in the United States for some time but have never gotten their papers together. Some of them have stayed and gone into other types of work."

Whether the clinic serves immigrants or needy local citizens, second- and third-year students have provided legal aid to the South Bend area for more than 20 years. Each student handles an average two or three cases for the clinic in addition to their full schedule of classes. Students earn three credit hours per semester for their volunteer clinic work.

The majority of cases involve family law, but the clinic is divided into six divisions: court-appointed special advocates for children, case screening committees for the Indiana Civil Liberties Union, case workers for the Center for the Homeless, and Cass County (Mich.) misdemeanors.

Second-year student Julie Douglas thinks the clinic provides a valuable service not only for her resume and experience but for the clients.

"The clinic gives a practical look to what you don't learn in class," Douglas said. "We appear in court before judges, argue motions, negotiate with other attorneys, draft memorandums; it's very beneficial."

Douglas thinks the clinic has created a new role for itself since the clinic's emergence in the nearby inner city. Students always got a hands-on education at the campus-based clinic, but with bigger offices and more student volunteers, the clinic has assisted a record number of clients.

"The clinic is much more accessible to clients," Douglas said. "They won't have to find where it is in the basement of the

law school, which itself is hard to find."

As Douglas knows, the bigger the office the more cases there will be to handle. The second-year student was with the clinic last semester before the summer opening of the new office and has noticed a big difference in client attitudes.

"We have 10 times the amount of room here," Douglas said. "I think that helps the environment the students have to work in, but clients feel more comfortable coming in here because there is a private room for them to meet one-on-one with you."*

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