

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSTTY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Northeast Ohio Legal Services

Personal Experience

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STEPHEN A. HTLL

Interviewed

by

James B. Callen

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: STEPHEN A. HILL

INTERVIEWER: James B. Callen

SUBJECT: Legal Services practice in Columbiana County

DATE: April 21, 1992

C: This is an interview with Stephen A. Hill, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Northeast Ohio Legal Services, by James B. Callen, at Lisbon, Ohio, on April 21, 1992, at 12:25 p.m.

Steve, could you tell me a little bit of your background; where you were born, where you grew up, where you went to school?

H: I was born in the old Salem Hospital, and grew up in East Palestine, Ohio, which is in Columbiana County. I graduated from High School there, in 1972, and went on to Ada, Ohio, Ohio Northern University, for four years of college, and for the J.D. degree.

C: When did you graduate?

H: I got a B.A. in 1976, and I graduated from the law school in 1979.

C: What did you do after law school?

H: After I found out I passed the bar, I opened my own office, in East Palestine, which was basically two rooms, [was] putting a sign on the door, and [was] trying to figure out which books to buy.

C: That was just general practice of law?

H: Yes.

C: How did it come about that you got involved with Legal Services?

H: I can't remember whether it was the summer of 1980 or the summer of 1981, but I got a call from--I'm trying to think whether it was Mike Mondoch or Chuck Cook. They were calling attorneys from around the county to see whether they wanted to work part-time for Legal Services. So, I went over for an interview, not knowing really anything about Legal Services. I got hired as a part-time attorney.

C: When was that?

H: I can't remember. I think it might have been the summer of 1981.

C: You were also a Law Director in East Palestine?

H: Yes. I was appointed Law Director in November of 1986, and I ran for the office and was elected for a four year term. I was just replaced as Law Director in January of 1992.

C: How has Legal Services' practice differed from your private practice?

H: Mainly, I don't have to worry about whether the client is going to pay or not. Basically, I run into sort of the same things, landlord/tenant problems, interviewing for divorces. In my own practice, I've never run into welfare problems or anything like that.

C: Is there any other difference, in terms of the types of clients?

H: Well, in my own practice, I can be more selective. A lot of people in this county are inter-related. So you get a trend, for if one person comes in, whether it's in your own practice or in Legal Services, then you get brothers and uncles and cousins and step-parents. Sometimes, if you know the family in your private practice, you might not want to deal with that family, considering problems they run into. I'm not really that selective, here, in Legal Services.

C: Is there any difference in the attitude of the private bar, or the courts, towards you as a private attorney, and towards you as an attorney in Legal Services?

H: Over the years, the bar has sort of mellowed out. I

know, when I was first hired, it was because there was a controversy with the attorney that was down in the Lishon branch. He had gotten a judge mad at him. I know, for a couple years after I was working part-time for Legal Services, during each bar meeting, some attorneys would stand up and sort of become like Cato the Elder, in saying that Carthage must be destroyed; that type of thing. They got their two cents in, at every meeting, about Legal Services.

C: Could you describe some of those incidents in more detail? What was said, particularly when, what the circumstances were?

H: When I was hired, the incident, as I understood, was that someone had come to the attorney who was here and who hadn't accepted his case. I don't know whether it was a phone intake, or what, but the guy went into court and told the judge that he was supposed to be represented by a Legal Service attorney. So the judge took offense that the Legal Service attorney was not there to represent him, and that sort of started a feud. I think the other problem was, at that time, there was some grant money available, and someone in the bar thought the Bar Association could use the grant money better than Northeast Ohio Legal Services. I think part of the reason they were looking for attorneys to work part-time, was to try to diffuse the view that these were liberal attorneys from "mob-infected" Youngstown coming down to Columbiana County.

C: You mentioned going to Bar Association meetings and having things said. Can you remember any specifics [about] what may have been said at some of these meetings?

H: Basically that some of the attorneys would stand up and say that they want it on the record, that they were opposed to Northeast Ohio Legal Services being in the county. Basically, that was it.

C: How have things changed since then?

H: The judges and the bar have accepted that Legal Services is here, and even though they are not quite sure what all Legal Services handles, they do refer cases over here and clients.

C: How about the way judges and attorneys treat you as a Legal Services attorney? How has that changed?

H: I haven't been treated with any disrespect. All the clients I handle through Legal Services, I handle the same way as I handle my own, so that they haven't really treated me any different. It's sort of a hard

question to answer.

C: How do you account for the change? What factors do you think have caused the change in attitude?

H: Columbiana County, as I've mentioned before, is partially rural, Appalachia. So you have a lot of areas where people grew up in the same town, and they are inter-related, so you get sort of a clan-type feeling. There has always been a stigma attached to Mahoning County, for Columbiana County trying to keep themselves separate from Mahoning County, and vice versa. I think when Legal Services came down before, there was the feeling, "well, you're going to come in here, stir up trouble, take the grant money and eventually leave." I think since Legal Services has stayed put here, or has been here long enough, we are accepted as the norm, now.

C: What do you think the major problems are facing low-income people in Columbiana County that you're seeing?

H: There is basically no employment. I told a little bit of this story before. In Columbiana County in the 1850's when the canals were built. So, Columbiana County had a boom-time until the railroads came through, and the canals went bankrupt. So we have a lot of villages in the county like Dunganon and Salineville, even Lisbon itself, they were all on a canal route. They had a chance for prosperity. But when the canals folded, they didn't progress any. Then along the 1870's, through World War II, potteries were strong. They employed a lot of people, skilled laborers and unskilled laborers. Basically, in East Liverpool, there were a lot of English potters that came over, settling over in East Liverpool and Wellsville. Then, after World War II, the potteries didn't keep up with modernizing their machinery, and so potteries declined.

After World War II, the steel mills picked up all this labor over in Midland and up in Youngstown. There in the mid-1970's where the steel mills went bankrupt, there wasn't anything left to pick up jobs for young people. Quite a few people in Columbiana County, when they would graduate from high school, they would join the military. That was their way out of that county. That gave them some sort of place to go. Now, in the 1990's, the military being cut back, there is really nothing to pick up the slack. So, Columbiana County has basically been in a depression since, I'd say, 1979, and it's sort of been gradually rebuilding with small businesses. The various communities in the area, have finally discovered they could put on pageants, and there is some historical value that they can draw

outside money in.

C: In terms of the problems that the clients are experiencing that you deal with through Legal Services, how have those changed over the years, if at all?

H: There has always been a problem with housing. Now that people with low incomes might move into a house that might not be fit to live in, but they could afford to rent. So, with various communities like Salem and East Liverpool, which have been having housing inspectors that would go out and try to upgrade the housing, there has been some movement where people would live, where people can afford to live, that is slowly being addressed. In divorces, there has slowly been recognition by the judges and the lawyers, that there were a lot of people out there that need help for divorces and domestic relations-type situations.

C: During the time that you've worked here, what have been the most significant changes, both in terms of how the offices [have] operated, and the types of clients, or cases that you've dealt with, that you've experienced over this time?

H: In office operation, we now have a closer tie with the Youngstown office. For a while, in the mid-1980's, after I was just in the office by myself with Mrs. Wendel, it was sort of a feeling that was cut off from the rest of the Northeast Ohio Legal Services. Now, we have gotten back to having a better connection.

C: How has that occurred?

H: More discussion on the phone. [Also], Mrs. Wendel goes up to Youngstown every so often, to bring news on what's happening there, back down here. Mr. Greismann has come down here on a regular basis to review files. We're tied in with the computer and fax lines. As for client problems, it's basically the same sort of thing we faced when I first came in here. The only thing that has really improved, is the relationship with the Welfare Department, the Department of Human Services.

C: Talk a little bit about that. How has that improved?

H: When I first was part of this, we would have county hearings at least once a month because of what the Welfare Department would do. The Welfare Department acted as if we were adversaries. Then, somewhere along the line, some other organizations in the county got together, like Family Community Services, Catholic Charities, Community Action, Aid in Salem. [They] got together and sat down with Mrs. Carter of the Welfare Department, and said, "Well, we're having problems in

these areas." That sort of established a line of communication, so that we have fewer needs to call them on denying somebody.

C: How has the office's relationship been with other non-profit's and social services agencies in the county?

H: It's been pretty good. I'm a member of the Community Action Board, because I belong to Northeast Ohio Legal Services. I have a seat on their board of directors. So when we were up in the office, up on North Market Street, we got a working relationship with Catholic Services, because they were right next door. So, this established connections to know people. If they have a problem, they can call us, or we can call them. We have a working relationship with Barb Decort at SAVE . . .

C: SAVE is what?

H: That's the shelter for battered women.

C: Did your law school prepare you for either private practice or Legal Services' practice?

H: Not really. I think you only go to law school to learn how to take the bar. Once you get out of the bar you learn how to practice law. You deal with people.

C: What is the significant difference when you say that you have to learn how to practice law when you get out of law school?

H: In law school, they might give you court situations, or give you a paper situation to take a test on, and apply all the principles of law, but when you get out, you have to actually deal with people and everybody's different quirks, and then, you have to learn how to find the right law to apply to the situation, and sort of second guess how a judge is going to see the situation. The only difference between now and one hundred years ago, is they don't actually require you to study the law books and apprentice to another attorney, but you sort of have to learn that on your own.

C: How did it prepare you to be a Legal Services' attorney?

H: I took a course in juvenile law and poverty law, or something like that, but I learned more working for Legal Services on how to work in my own office, than I did from law school. I learned how to keep notes. If everytime someone called or everytime you sent a letter out, and I found out that other attorneys in the private sector--it would be the phone call and something

else would have come up and they wouldn't have written it down, so they wouldn't remember what they had sent out. But, with the forms and so forth, it is a little bit more organized.

C: If you had the chance what things would you have changed over the last few years, working with Legal Services, or what changes would you like to see now?

H: I think probably at a national level, you'd get these newsletters every now and then, and you'd see how much garbage is going on between the national board and congress, and so forth. It just seems like they're playing politics and they're not worried with work that actually has to be done, or problems that have to be solved.

C: What kind of changes would you like to see? Anything in the day to day operations of NOLS?

H: Nothing off-hand strikes me.

C: How about describing what a typical day is like for you in working with Legal Services?

H: Basically, you come in and find out what appointments are scheduled, find out what phone messages are there, what phone intakes have to be returned, what letters have to be answered. What I have found is that the first hour, or so is the most hectic, trying to figure out what is most urgent to get out of the way first. Then, you get rid of the phone intakes and return calls. When you have clients in, [we] try to make sure we have enough time scheduled to adequately interview the client. If you can do something that they can take care of before somebody else comes in with a different problem. The most hectic days are when Mr. Griesmann comes down. Then, you have to set aside at least three hours to go through all the cases, besides trying to answer phone calls and phone intakes, and having clients that just drop in, out of nowhere.

C: Anything else in terms of dealing with clients on a typical day, or going to court?

H: It's hard to say because everybody's different. So, you have someone in for a small estate where they can't afford an attorney. . . . You would deal with a widow differently than if someone is coming in here angry at their landlord or concerned about someone trying to shut their water off. I really don't know how to answer that question.



C: Are there any things that stand out in your mind over the last seven or eight years, in terms of legal problems that you've had to deal with and that you've felt particularly successful about?

H: When I was first down here, we didn't handle a lot of paternity defenses. We had several men come in. The welfare department would be giving the mothers ADC. They would be bringing paternity suits against the alleged fathers, trying to find someone who had money to support the children. So, when we started getting people in here for paternities, we had to show the juvenile court judge that there was precedence; that instead of the fathers having to put up the money--I think it would start out for a blood test, it was about five hundred dollars for the blood test. They would have to put that up, if they wanted a blood test. Judge Pike was over here. Some case law said that the Welfare Department could up-front the money for the blood test, so that all we had to do was file a denial request that the blood test would be taken, and that would pretty much determine whether our client was a father or not. That's gotten so that now they take the blood test before they even go into court to determine this. The other thing, that Legal Services just got into last Fall, was the temporary restraining order that I know Attorney Mark Slack worked on and got implemented. It seems to have been accepted by the bar, [and it has] worked pretty good.

C: That was in respect to what?

H: That was with domestic violence--[a] husband or boyfriend beating up the wife, and she, needing a restraining order without going to the prosecutor's office, to keep him from coming into the house.

C: Compared to when you first started, has there been a change in the amount of domestic violence that you've seen?

H: When I started sitting on interviews for divorces and doing interviews for divorces, now, I'd say at least three-fourths of them would say, "My husband is an alcoholic. He goes out and drinks." Maybe one-third of those would mention some kind of violence one time or another. I haven't really noticed a dramatic increase. It just always was there.

C: Is there anything else, Steve, that you think is significant that we haven't talked about, that you think would be worthwhile addressing?

H: You were asking about improvements. I know back in

the early 1980's, the Columbiana County Welfare Department was only granting general relief. I think they were six months off and six months on. When Legal Services stepped in, that changed the set up, but that is sort of moot now. The state steps in and changes that. Other than that, I really can't think of anything.

C: How about any major changes in how you practice now, in terms of how the office operates? Have there been any significant changes over the years in that regard?

H: Well, as long as Mary Ellen Wendel is here--she is the keystone. She can remember whether someone has been in before, or whether someone has mentioned who they're related to, and if it is a phone intake. It's sort of a thing that you can't really put on a machine. If she didn't remember them being in--usually someone will call, and a year later they'll call again and call again, over the same thing--but Mary Ellen Wendel remembers who called before, and who they are related to, which is a big help.

C: Have there been any changes between the time that you started and today, as far as the practice within the office is concerned? When you started there was, I think, a full-time attorney at the time.

H: Right. There was a full-time attorney, a para-legal; and then, we had a student intern that would come in. We went through some changes in personnel, which there for a while, was only basically, Mary Ellen Wendel and myself. Mark Slack came down and sort of got things stabilized.

C: Has that change in staffing affected your practice at all?

H: Not really. I just have more time to sort what comes through the door. It's one thing to try to answer phone intakes, and try to interview clients, and then not have time to sort of think about what has come in. When everything has to be handled now, it's nice to have some breathing space to better serve the client.

C: Anything else you can think of that might be worth noting?

H: [None] other than the physical layout of the offices. We have moved from our original building, on North Market Street. It was a ground floor with three offices and one reception area. Now, we've moved to a second floor with two larger offices and a larger reception area. Probably, in the future, we'll have to move again, just to accommodate people trying to climb

the steps. That's about all I can think of.

C: Okay. Thank you, Steve.

H: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW