

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Northeast Ohio Legal Services

Personal Experience

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CHRISTINE BLAIR LEGOW

Interviewed

by

James B. Callen

on

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INTERVIEWEE: CHRISTINE BLAIR LEGOW

INTERVIEWER: James B. Callen

SUBJECT: legal services, Trumbull County, types of
clients and problems served

DATE: May 8, 1992

C: This is an interview with Christine Blair Legow, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Northeast Ohio Legal Services, by James B. Callen, at Warren, Ohio, on May 8, 1992, at 1:10 p.m.

Chris, could you describe your background; where you were born, where you grew up?

L: I was born in Bazetta Township, Trumbull County, Ohio. [It was] at home, on July 19, 1952 on a farm. My father was an electrician, and my mother was a school teacher. I grew up with two working parents. I grew up as the last of four children. My nearest sibling is nine years older, so I grew up fairly independently.

C: Where did you go to school?

L: I went to Bazetta Elementary School and Lakeview High School, Hiram College, and Case Western Reserve University Law School.

C: How did you become associated with Northeast Ohio Legal Services?

L: Following my graduation from Hiram College, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I was working as a shoe salesperson at Strouss' Department Store. I was urged

by my, then boyfriend to volunteer somewhere. So, I contacted Trumbull County Legal Aid Society and asked about volunteering opportunities. They offered me the position of being a para-legal for an outreach program for older persons throughout Trumbull County. That position was funded for nine months. I worked the nine months in that position, and then, I worked for three months as a secretary for that office. From there, I went to Law School, and when I graduated from Law School, there was an opportunity of a position with Northeast Ohio Legal Services, which was the result of a merger between Trumbull County Legal Aid Society and Mahoning County Legal Assistance Association. So, I was actually returning to the program that I had worked for previously.

C: What was the Trumbull County Legal Aid Society like when you worked there?

L: It was a very small operation which took mostly divorce cases. There was one secretary/bookkeeper who was Helen Paajanen, who had been involved with the Legal Aid Society since the start. I believe it started in about 1969. There was one secretary. When I came on staff, I was a part of a hiring of two attorneys and myself. Prior to that time, I believe there had been only one attorney at a time in that office, but they had received some additional funding. So we all came on board. It was not a particularly sophisticated office.

The library consisted of a set of the Ohio Revised Code and it looked like a donated set of Ohio Jurisprudence. That was probably from the law library, as a matter of fact. Because they continued to provide a set of Ohio Jurisprudence for many years after that and included updates. So, that's probably where they got those books from.

There was not a lot of back-up. There were obviously, no computers. They also had a separate phone line running in. . . . It was the Bar Association Referral Service. The program was still very much linked with the Bar, which is how it had originally started. I think that originally it had been an attorney volunteer program, and then, had gradually gone to being able to hire an attorney at a time.

It was located at 303 Mahoning Avenue, which was the old Kinsman House. When they added the attorneys in that hire of which I was a part, they had to use one of the other rooms across the hall. We were in, what I assumed to have been, bedrooms. Downstairs in the same building was the Trumbull County Office of Elderly Affairs. That's where they had gotten the money to

hire me into the program. They were still having a great deal of financial trouble trying to keep everybody on. There was no stable funding. I think one of the godsend was when the Legal Services Corporation was not only put into effect, which was 1974, but actually started dispersing the money in a kind of regular way. I know one of the later problems they had was resolved by seeking funding from Trumbull County Department of Human Services, which provided a stable source of income.

C: How do you think law school prepared you for what you would be doing here at Legal Services?

L: I think law school doesn't give you any of the sense of what the human consequences are of law, both of the cases that you are representing and of people's ongoing lives other than in a law suit and of what other alternatives there are other than to be filing law suits for people. Also, it's a rather dehumanizing experience. I guess that professors want to instill in you a respect for the law and a respect for the judicial system. But it certainly was the antithesis of my prior education in which professors were very open to discussions and willing to talk to you at any point after class. Law school was a much more formal, rigid experience.

Also, I think the students were much different as well. Many of the students were extremely oriented to the economic side of their future practice. I'm not sure, but I can't recall anyone being particularly excited about getting in to court and vindicating their client's rights. Although, I suppose that would have been reaching to be able to think that far ahead. I suppose everybody was sort of just trying to get through the day. But, I don't think that law school prepares you well for being a lawyer, and you really do need to have at least a year of internship. That would be one way of assisting private attorneys to get help with their own cases while taking on interns who would, through them, be learning the ins and outs of what to file, where to file, how to get things done. I think that's how it's done in the Canadian System.

C: What are the most significant changes that you've seen at NOLS over the time that you've been here, both organizationally and in terms of the legal service that is being delivered?

L: I suppose organizationally, there has been a change in the management structure. Under the previous director, Robert Clyde, a lot of the decision-making was made through group-process, in which the group would come to a consensus on major issues, and the director would act

on that consensus. Although, for minor issues, the director would act in consultation with one or two of the senior attorneys.

Once the new director came on staff in 1990, that structure changed, and I became included in a management team consisting of members of the administrative staff, the associate director, the executive director, and me, which meets on a regular basis to discuss ongoing issues and make decisions, or at least discuss larger issues for the group, how to resolve problems. Although, certainly, day to day management is conducted by the executive director. In terms of the cases that are handled, I think because this staff is composed of a number of attorneys who have a long experience, we are able to handle cases in a remarkably expeditious manner. We can determine over the phone what the issue is, whether it requires any kind of legal intervention and often resolve issues over the phone. We are able to do quick legal analysis, prepare pleadings very quickly, and I think, act remarkably efficiently on legal cases. We've hired a number of attorneys within the last two years and they don't have those advantages, of course. But, what they offer is the ability of others on staff to continue working in their areas of expertise, while the new attorneys develop expertise of their own.

C: What changes would you like to see made or that you would have liked to have seen made over the time that you've been here?

L: I guess that I would to have liked to have been part of the executive process at an earlier time [and] that I feel that I have missed out on some of the growth that I could have had as a part of that process. I've always felt sort of a nagging guilt, I suppose, about our ability to provide fuller services for Ashtabula County and that, although we provide Ashtabula County legal assistance with a grant, we probably should be providing additional attorney time with them. I guess that I, professionally, should have broadened the kind of legal work that I do, that it's modestly awkward at this point to be learning the rudiments of housing law and welfare law when those around me are rapidly picking it up. I don't think I would have changed much else. Either that, or I have forgotten what I would have changed.

C: Your husband is also an attorney at Northeast Ohio Legal Services. How has it been working in the same organization?

L: Actually it has gone remarkably easily. I make a conscious effort not to bring work home. [I feel] that

"home time" is family time and that it's best to avoid any discussion of work at home. We work at two separate offices at this point. So, we really don't have a lot of contact with each other. I occasionally consult him on welfare issues. We are part of a joint case review process, but each of us as attorneys and individuals in our own right, we certainly don't rely on or depend on each other for anything in our relationships with other staff members, in the legal work that we do. We do very separate kinds of legal work, [and] we have very distinctly different styles of working on legal issues.

My husband is not as strongly interested in trial work, and I am. I think our personalities are somewhat different just in the way that we conduct our legal work. There was a time when we were working off the same desk, as a matter of fact. When I returned in 1982 from maternity leave, there had been some office shuffling. My husband had moved into my office and the program manager had moved into his old office. The legal assistant had moved into what had been my formerly old office.

When I returned from maternity leave, there was not an office for me to move into. So, when I came back, I set up a play pen in my husband's office, and during nap time, he and I worked off of the same desk. That was awkward and probably not a situation to be repeated. If we had had two desks, it might have been doable. One desk was a little too tight. I continued to work very much part-time. I think I came in three afternoons a week, probably until January of 1983, which is when I had proposed and it had been accepted that I come to the Warren office. The former managing attorney of the Warren office, Tony Natale had been appointed as referee in the Domestic Relations Court, and I assumed his position here. Although, I wasn't managing attorney of the office for perhaps, two years.

C: Could you describe a typical day?

L: Very frequently, I have a hearing first thing in the morning, and I generally take the file home the night before and go directly to the hearing. I may have one or two hearings. If those are domestic relations hearings they are usually not particularly stressful. I might do a quick divorce and maybe a motion hearing and be back to the office by say, ten o'clock. While I'm out, I usually take legal pleadings that need to be filed. I also, might be doing some checking of old court files for current clients for whom I want to do a little bit of checking on what has already happened in their old case. I might be checking a juvenile court file for whatever might be filed by CSB or checking with the

Child Support Enforcement Agency to see whether child support has been paid.

I would then usually come back to the office by maybe ten or ten-thirty. I then, probably attempt to return whatever phone calls I had. I attempt to put in order the files from that morning, draft up judgment entries, or get copies of referee's reports out to the client. I then, would typically have probably an interview or two in the afternoon, try to prepare for the next day's hearings as well as answer phone calls from on-going clients. If it is my phone intake day, if I've been in court in the morning, I'm probably rushing back as quickly as possible to get to the office to answer phones for new client intake. Then [I am] putting together the papers that go with the file; the intake form, the disposition form. . . . Usually there is not enough time in the day to complete everything, but that goes with most jobs.

With the domestic relations cases, at this point, I find that my need for legal research is pretty minimal [and] that I've kept up well enough on the area of law in general that for individual cases. I generally don't have to do much research. For other kinds of cases, I'm usually consulting with other attorneys, first and then, I do have to do much more research on those cases.

C: Have you seen any significant change in the needs that bring clients into the office, the types of problems that they're having?

L: Actually, no I don't. Certainly for the domestic relations cases . . . I mean, obviously, the facts change in every case, but those cases are pretty consistent.

C: Have you seen any change in the level of violence involved in cases?

L: Actually, I have. There are always extremely violent cases, but I think with some clients, they are coming in earlier in the cycle of violence. At least for some clients, word has gotten to them that there is an alternative. They don't need to be beaten, they don't need to stay with an abuser, and they are getting out at an earlier stage.

For some of our domestic violence petitions, the petition may say, there has only been one incident in which the client was slapped or thrown against the wall, received a black eye--that's not to say that there aren't clients who receive broken bones and end up getting shot at, or shot, or stabbed--but for some clients, they are coming in earlier in the process.

They are not waiting. That, I imagine is a result of the media, [and] that there has been, in terms of docudramas and in the newspapers, a lot on the issue of domestic violence, and I think people are much more aware of their options. Those are not always great sometimes; but they are aware of them, and they are much more willing to act on them.

C: Is there anything we haven't talked about that you think is important or that you would like to talk about?

L: Not for purposes of this conversation.

C: Thank you.

L: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW