

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Northeast Ohio Legal Services

Personal Experience

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MARY ELLEN WENDEL

Interviewed

by

James B. Callen

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: MARY ELLEN WENDEL
INTERVIEWER: James B. Callen
SUBJECT: Legal Services in Columbiana County, prior
work experience, establishment of the office
DATE: April 21, 1992

C: This is an interview with Mary Ellen Wendel for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Northeast Ohio Legal Services, on April 21, 1992, at 11:30 a.m., by James Callen, at Lisbon, Ohio.

Mary Ellen, could you briefly describe your background, where you were born, your education, your family.

W: I was born in Cleveland. My father was a policeman; my mother had done housework. She was working before they were married. They both were immigrants from Ireland. I have one sister. She is now retired from the Nursing profession. We both attended Ursuline Academy of the Sacred Heart, which is a Catholic High School. From there, I went on to take a course at the Ohio Institute for Medical Assistants. Since there was three hundred dollars in the bank account for me, that meant one year college or vocational school. So, I chose the secretarial school. After that, I went on to be a transcriber of the old Edison cylinders at University Hospitals. I progressed from there up to being secretary in surgery, where I just took dictation directly from the surgeons. From there, I went on to work for four physicians in Cleveland. From there, I went on to work at Sherwin-Williams as secretary to the Executive Director. Then, I got married and quit working. I

came to Warren. I had two children in Warren. My husband was offered a job in Salem at Salem School of Technology, it was called at that time. He was the one full-time professor. They had one part-time professor. In 1963, the Salem School of Technology was absorbed by Kent State, and he went to work with Kent State. I did not go back to work until 1978 when I did some part-time work for Richard's Moving and Storage. The reason I went back to work was that I required seven more quarters to be eligible for social security on my own. At that time, the feeling was that since my husband would have teacher's retirement, he would not have social security. So, we felt this was worthwhile picking up both incomes. The transportation new laws were changed, and they couldn't afford to keep me on. So, for two weeks, I was out hunting a job, and I was lucky enough in November of 1980 to get the job with North-east Ohio Legal Services.

C: You started with Legal Services when it first opened its office in Columbiana County. Is that right?

W: Right.

C: What was it like that first year, setting up the office?

W: The actual setting up of the office was easy enough. But, it seemed as though our reputation was such, when the word came out there was going to be free legal services, that we would do all sorts of things. I recall one woman that wanted Mike to come down and look at the cockroaches in her cupboard. They just felt that we would do everything for everybody. The Bar Association was not too thrilled with having us here. Mike Mondock tried to get them to accept some of the referrals from us, but they were not interested at all in accepting referrals for fee-generating cases. Then, we had the confrontation with Judge Bettis, which meant that, for six or seven months, we were doing no divorces whatsoever because we did not want to go in front of the judge.

To settle that particular problem, arrangements were made with Attorney Richard Shelar, that we would do the intakes, type up the papers and he would do the court representation for us. That progressed to having Coleen Dailey as a second attorney to do it and Carol Bica at that time. We were funded for some sixty cases a year. Sixty cases a year is still the same number. Though Bica is no longer doing it and Mark Slack is doing it in lieu of Attorney Bica.

- C: What do you recall as being the problems? You mentioned a problem with Judge Bettis. What do you recall as being the specific parts of those problems?
- W: The case in question was a gentleman who came into the office. At the moment, I can't think of what his particular problem was, but he had a court case the next day in front of Judge Bettis. And Mike had said--whatever the situation was--there was no defense. There was no sense in our going in. The client went into court and announced to the court that Northeast Ohio Legal Services was representing him, and Judge Bettis was very upset because we had no attorney there. That started the whole big problem.
- C: What was the attitude of the Bar, the court, and clients back at that time when we first started?
- W: Prior to the confrontation?
- C: During this first year or so. During these first couple of years that Legal Services operated in Columbiana County.
- W: The Bar was not very friendly to us at all. In fact, they were sort of anxious to find something that we had done wrong, my feeling was. For example, we were doing an estate for one family, and it was quickly reported to the Bar that we were doing an estate and that [the case] was a fee-generating case. However, I, myself had seen the house. There was no money for anybody to get in that estate because I had gone out to notarize a paper for the lady in question. Once that was explained, they sort of settled down a little bit. As I said, the general population felt that we were going to handle everything. I think the Welfare Department was a little upset with our coming in because we were doing quite a bit of checking as to whether they were following regulations or not. That got sort of . . . they weren't too happy to have us telling people, "Well, go ask for a state hearing. . . ." But, even that got straightened out. Slowly, things are settling down, and we are happy with more people around here. And they're happy with us.
- C: Can you think of any more specific examples either with local agencies or even clients that were typical of what was going on back then, things that may stand out in your mind?
- W: Mildred had one poor man that came in, and he was showing her pictures of his wife who was suing him for divorce. He had been her pimp. He was showing Mildred all these pictures of this lady in the buff.

C: You mean Mildred Adams?

W: Yes. She was down here for maybe a year and a half-- I'm not quite sure how long. She just kept saying, "I don't need to see those. I don't need to see those!"

C: I never heard that story.

W: Our space at the Gibson Building kept switching around. First of all, in the one room right next to us was Grange Auto Insurance Adjustors. Since it was only a door directly outside, they were in and out all the time, going out to see the car, coming back in, going back out to see the car. Their clients were coming in. Their clients were helping themselves to our coffee because they felt that I was their secretary for the whole business. It was kind of hard until we got that organized. In the wintertime, it was really bad because everytime they opened the door, there was this draft that came right in across my feet. Slowly, we got them down on the other end of the building, and we used their office for Mildred, then.

C: That's when the office was located where?

W: [It was on] 964 North Market Street. Then, we gave up a little bit more space for Catholic Service Bureau when they wanted to expand. So we were just continually squeezing ourselves out of there. Eventually, we really got squeezed out. At that time, we really did have a good rapport with the Catholic Service Bureau. They were doing counseling for the clients that wanted divorces. The feeling, at that time, was that all the clients that applied for a divorce should speak to a counselor first to make sure that this is what they wanted. So they were doing these things for free for us, they [Catholic Services] and Mental Health. We still have pretty good relations with both organizations.

C: How have things changed from 1980 until today in terms of the attitudes that you were talking about before, the Bar or the court or the clients?

W: Things are much, much better. Just last week, I had a call from the Secretary of the Bar Association saying that he had a lady, who was on ADC, and she had a problem with a post-divorce situation. He very nicely asked me, "Do you take this case?" I said, "No, we aren't doing any post-divorce situations." He said, "Financially, would she have been eligible?" I said, "Oh, yes." He said, "Fine, I'll report that." It was

not the confrontational situation we had had in the beginning. Things are much better. People call back and forth, and ask us, "Is this the kind of a case we handle?" And it works quite well.

C: Are there any other examples that you could think of in terms of either the private Bar [or] courts behaving differently towards NOLS than they did ten years ago?

W: Yes. I can remember one attorney calling and wanting to know if we could take this case, and I kept saying, "Well, what's the case about? I need to know the finances." "Are you going to take it, or aren't you going to take it?" I had a real difficult time explaining to that particular gentleman that we had to go by particular guidelines, what have you. We haven't had that situation more recently. I think they realize that we do have financial guidelines, and we have priorities; and there are certain things that we can financially handle, and certain things that are not in our balliwak.

C: How about the attitude of clients? You mentioned that in 1980, they assumed that we would be doing everything. Have you noticed a change in that attitude, and have you noticed any change in the types of clients and the types of problems we are getting today as compared to years ago?

W: Oh, the attitudes are somewhat the same, that we should be doing everything, some of them. And they get upset when I say, "That's outside our priorities. No, we don't do bankruptcies. We can't sue your doctor," things like that. I think they are getting a little bit more accepting, the clients, as to what we do and what we don't do and [are] realizing that on the whole we don't do everything.

C: Have you noticed any difference in the types of problems clients are having today as compared to a few years ago? Are we getting more calls in any one area or another area?

W: We are getting a lot more calls for housing. When we first started, we had a lot of calls for denial of food stamps or denial of ADC. We don't get very many of those anymore. There were a lot of repossessions when we first started. We are not getting too many calls for those things. I don't know what caused all the changes, except that Welfare is definitely doing a better job than they were. Also, there is a new director and it's much easier to talk back and forth now with the caseworkers and the supervisors over there.

C: NOLS relocated from the office that you were describing to one downtown. Has that made any difference? Have you noticed any difference?

W: It's made a lot of difference. We are a lot closer to the Post Office. We are a lot closer to the Court House. We can run over and get something without having to drive down. We are closer to the Welfare Department so that people can just walk over if they wanted to. At the previous spot, there was free parking. Parking is sometimes a little problem here--though it is still only ten cents for parking. Finding a place to park is sometimes difficult. For example, yesterday, when they were having a demonstration in front of the courthouse, there was no parking left here on the street at all. We have much more space here, which is great. But, it is a little bit isolated here for the three of us. Previously, we could chat back and forth with the Catholic Service Bureau, or whoever, as we were going through to the restroom. Now, we have our own restroom. We have more space for less expense, though the disadvantage is the stairway. Though, for people, if I realize they are elderly when they call to make an appointment, I say, "We have a big long stairway. Will you be able to manage the stairway?" And, let them decide whether they want to or not. If they can't manage the stairway, we have arrangements made with Catholic Service Bureau to use one of their offices where there is a ramp. There is no problem there. We have done notarizing various papers down in the car for people. We just walk down there and meet them on the street and handle everything that way.

C: You work at a satellite office, so to speak. How has that affected your operation? How do you think it has worked being located away from the central office?

W: I think we seem to manage pretty well, really. There are times, that it would be great if we were able to plug right into the computer and see whether or not somebody was a client. Otherwise, I have printouts that I have to go through--two years in one and two years in another one--to check to see if there is a conflict of interest anywhere. Sometimes, there isn't an attorney here to answer something that I feel needs immediate attention, which means sometimes, I have to refer them up to the Youngstown office. [That] is making another phone call for people, but there is nothing that can be done otherwise if I don't have anybody. I won't have anybody if it's a Wednesday, and I won't have anybody in for some reason until the following Monday. As far as working with the people up in the Youngstown office, people have been pretty cooperative, as far as I've been concerned, in trying to help us out when we needed help. I'm not too

thrilled about going up and putting that stuff up on the computer. I am not a number puncher on the typewriter. I hate numbers. However, I do it.

C: What have been the most significant changes that have taken place over the last ten years, both in terms of the practice and just the day to day operation of the office?

W: When the office opened, we had a full-time attorney, five days a week. Then, Mildred Adams came on as a para-legal, and we had her five days a week. Then, we got Steve Hill as a part-time attorney all in the same year. So, we had three legal people plus me working in the beginning. Slowly, that sort of deteriorated, and now, we are down to just two part-time attorneys which makes it not quite as efficient an office. I'm sure it is not as satisfying to the clients to find that there isn't an attorney in today, and "You'll have to call on Tuesday."

C: Are there any other changes that have taken place over the years that have stood out?

W: I can't think of anything right off the bat.

C: Going back to the problems you've described that existed when the program was first set up, is there anything that stands out in your mind, that may have occurred, that helped change this attitude? Or, was it just kind of a gradual process?

W: I think it was just a gradual process. Mike Mondock was a Youngstown attorney, parochial around here in this area. When Steve was hired--he was one of their boys, as far as they felt--and they wanted to help support him. So, I think this sort of helped us ease into it. Some of the people that originally were against us have retired or left the area. The newer young crowd [are] not interested in what happened in the past. So they're willing, some of them, to let bygones be bygones and not gripe about it. Of course, as I understand, the Bar Association had applied for the same money as we had, and they didn't get it. So, that made them a little bit unhappy with us. We were the enemy.

C: Is there anything in your day to day operation that has changed? You have a computer now.

W: Oh, I have a computer, now that I didn't have before.

C: How has that affected your life?

W: Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's not too good. There have been times that the computer doesn't work the way it's supposed to. I'm calling the eight hundred number to have them figure out what I'm supposed to do next. With the typewriter, I could have just banged it out on the typewriter. We have a second line as of this month which is going to help a great deal. It's a private line, so we can make out-going calls at the same time as somebody else is using the phone. So, that should help. We have the FAX machine sitting here, but we haven't got it hooked up yet. I have to call the telephone company and make arrangements. So that also is going to make life easier. Though our landlord has been tremendous, we use his FAX machine for free, all the time, and he comes up here once in a while and makes two or three copies. He says, "Oh, it balances out."

C: When we first began talking, you described rather an extensive experience when you were in Cleveland working in various offices. I think you had mentioned that you were doing dictation off of the Edison cylinders.

W: Yes. In the records department.

C: What was office work like back then, as compared to today?

W: Very restrictive.

C: What years are we talking about now?

W: I started there in 1941.

C: When you say restrictive, what do you mean?

W: You had specific time that you went on a break, specific time to be back. The director of the hospital was definitely a patriarch. If he saw any of the employees walking along in the hallway chewing gum, he stuck his hand out and said, "Give me the gum." It was a little different.

C: How about just in terms of the work and the facilities that you had available?

W: We had electric typewriters, and they had counters on them. We were paid bonuses, depending on how much production we had. They gave you so many points for doing an x-ray report [and] so many points for doing a complete workup report because that would be longer. How many pages all had to be calculated, plus the counter on the typewriter. When I started, I was paid fifty cents an hour. If you met the goal that they had set, you got an extra five cents an hour. So, you all

worked like mad to get that extra five cents an hour. They really worked us.

C: The counters counted what?

W: The strokes on the typewriter.

C: How about your other office employment at that time? What other things were drastically different from what you do today?

W: At that stage, I was just strictly transcribing. During the time I was downstairs transcribing, World War II began. They started calling in the doctors; and we typed up, as extra things, that we did the physical examinations for the doctors and the forms, so that they would be able to go. That was something different. Years are gone, but I can't remember for sure. The East Ohio Gas Company explosion was during the time I was in the transcription department. From our windows, we could see the red glow in the distance. We really didn't know what was going on for sure until we started hearing all the emergency calls for the doctors. If the operator called a doctor, "Dr. Sloan" he was just to answer the phone. But if they called, "Dr. Sloan, Dr. Sloan, Dr. Sloan," this was an emergency--get going. We could hear all this in the transcription room. It was kind of scary wondering what was happening to the world.

C: The East Ohio Gas Explosion was what?

W: It was 1943, 1944 someplace in through there.

C: What happened?

W: A gas built up someplace along the line and exploded. Blocks were leveled. I had a description of it at home in a composite of front sheets from the Cleveland Plain Dealer. Gas mains were just blowing up. Many, many people were killed and burned in that. One friend of mine was working at the gas company, and I think he said he was on a break at the time. He heard it, saw it, and he was just young. He was off and running home. He ran all the way home, three or four miles. When he got home, he was in his bare feet. His shoes had burned all the way through. It was quite an experience.

C: What about the effect of copying machines and computers that they had on your everyday life?

W: [There is] a great deal of improvement since copying machines. When I first started working at the hospital, it was carbon copies. If you made a mistake, you

had to go through ten layers to get all the mistake taken out. Sometimes, you would erase all the way through, and you would have to start all over again; and it was not too great a situation. Copying machines have made a great, great big difference. Also, the transcribing machines and dictating machines are a lot easier. The Edison rolls--the wax rolls had to be scraped down. The top layer had to be taken off. There was a little machine that a girl sat at and wound and got it taken off. Then, they were put back out for the doctors to use again, until they got too thin to be used.

C: That's how you erased them?

W: Yes. You erased them by scraping off the wax. There were times that you couldn't understand what somebody had said, and you'd have everybody in the office trying to listen in; and [you would] play it back and play it back to figure out what it was. Sometimes, you'd finally have to get the doctor down to say, "What did you say here?"

C: Would each playback make the quality a little worse?

W: Yes. It would make it thinner and thinner. That was the time they were doing the research on the RH factor. The gal that did the scraping off, she was sort of a general errand girl. She found out that they had the monkeys up on the eighth floor. So, we all went traipsing upstairs to see the monkeys that they used for the research.

C: This was at University Hospital?

W: Yes. Another advantage was that Dr. Claude Beck was a big experimenter surgeon at the hospital, so that they were doing open heart surgery, beginning the first ones there. He was doing some brain surgery, and we would get to see some of the movies that were going on. It was kind of seeing progress in the making. Now, I look back at that, and it's just old hat. They do those all the time.

C: What is a typical day like for you at Legal Services?

W: I stop for the mail on the way in, usually. I come in here and answer phones, type, do filing, the usual, the secretarial type thing. I eat my lunch in the office, leave at 4:30. In this office, we do have a cleaning person that comes in once a month. I run around and water the plants, and I have to buy the paper supplies and stuff like that. Occasionally, I have to make a trip over to the courthouse for somebody. Sometimes, it's beat the clock day.

C: Have you seen any change in the needs of clients over the ten years or so that you've been employed here?

W: Well, many, many more people in the last ten years have lost their jobs. So, the poverty in Columbiana County is more wide-spread than it was even when we started in 1980.

C: How has that shown up in terms of the office?

W: More people are eligible than were before. They are calling for our services for various things, trying to get services to satisfy their situations.

C: Have you noticed any increase or change in the particular type of problems that clients are calling in with?

W: I think the biggest increase has been in housing and evictions. I really do.

C: So, you see a lot more people being evicted?

W: Mostly for non-payment of rent.

C: Is that for any particular part of the county or just in general?

W: The lower half of the county has more poverty than the upper half. We are more affluent in the Columbiana/Salem area, than below Lisbon. Several companies have closed, which has really been sad. A lot of the people in the lower part of the county worked in the mills, Werton, what have you, across the river. So, they have been affected by the closings.

C: I know you have not worked in Mahoning or Trumbull County. Do you have any sense of a difference in the type of problem that poor people are experiencing as opposed to the larger counties? Have you noticed any impoverished people living in any rural areas that might have a different type of problem?

W: I don't think I could answer that too satisfactorily. I really don't have any idea. There are many more black people in Trumbull and Mahoning County than here. So I would presume that situation may create more discrimination problems and such, than we face here. When we started, my husband found a calculation for us, and I think it was 1.5% of the county was black, which is a very small amount.

C: Have you noticed any increase in domestic abuse problem, compared to when you started?

W: Yes. Definitely, much more. It's usually because of

drugs or alcohol or things like that. Probably, the whole situation goes back to the economy. At least, they're reporting it here, now.

C: What kind of problems are you seeing?

W: Several of them have come in here with black eyes. Visible abuse that we have seen. Of course now, we have started this new TPO arrangement with SAVE, and that is helping some of it.

C: That's the Temporary Protective Order?

W: Yes. Of course, a lot of the police don't want to get involved. This is sort of forcing the police to get involved I think.

C: SAVE is what?

W: Sanctuary Advocacy Violence Elimination. That's a battered shelter.

C: You mentioned that you had some training, back before you started your work life, at a vocational school. What was that like?

W: That was for medical assistants. We learned the medical vocabulary. We learned to do the blood work, the urine work. I learned to take X-rays. I learned to do office work, office management, autoclaving instruments, things like that. We wore uniforms to school. It was a one year course. The school was in the Hanna building at 14th and Euclid downtown in Cleveland. It was the Ohio Institute for Medical Assistants run by Dr. Maurice Lawton at the time. Of course, it caused me a little of a problem. I had taken Gregg Shorthand in high school. They were teaching Fuller Shorthand. So, I switched from the one to the other, and Fuller was really much better for medical terms because it's a phonetic rather than short forms, which Gregg is. So, you sounded out the word as you went through it. It worked out much better. I haven't used much shorthand in years though.

C: Looking back over your time at Legal Services, what changes would you have liked to have seen made or what changes would you make today to improve things?

W: I'd like to see another attorney here full-time. Definitely. I think we could use one. I can't think of anything else. If we had another attorney, we could probably start doing some of the support and visitation problems and things that we don't do simply because we don't have enough time for them. We do get a lot of calls for those things. Post-Divorce.

C: Any other changes that you feel would be useful?

W: Of course, with the new Disabilities Act, we should be off the second floor and down lower. But, I don't see in this little town where we are ever going to find a building that's going to be suitable.

C: Is there anything else that you think is important or significant about your time here that you think we ought to discuss?

W: I can't think of anything.

C: Well, thank you very much.

W: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW