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Legal Aid Celebrates 50 Years of Justice for All

By Paul D. Julien

Pull up www.lsc.gov on the web and you will see Arizona Attorney General Janet Napolitano celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Southern Arizona Legal Aid (SALA). The Attorney General congratulated SALA for providing access to justice and hope for disadvantaged people - "At least in southern Arizona they have a chance to experience a little heaven on their earth while they are here." Supreme Court Justice, Tom Zlaket added: "For half a century, Southern Arizona Legal Aid has been there responding to the growing needs of our citizens. We know from history, the unhappy consequences that can flow whenever a segment of the popula-

tion perceives that it cannot get in the door, that it cannot obtain fair and equal treatment, that it cannot find help, that it has no access to justice. It certainly is not an exaggeration to say that the work of SALA and other legal service providers is vital to the preservation of our justice system and to the freedoms that you and I enjoy."

In recognition of SALA's success, Legal Services Corporation Vice President, Mauricio Vivero, announced a \$6.6 million, three-year grant to SALA and also awarded SALA a special technology grant to create a statewide legal services web site.

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He referred to SALA as a "national model for its innovative delivery system and dedicated staff." After the event, Arizona's program counsel from the Legal Services Corporation said that she "felt privileged to have the opportunity to be present at the celebration, not only of SALA's towering past achievements, but also of its current stability and promising future as an organization advocating for equal justice for low-income people."

Former SALA staff attorney and current U.S. Magistrate Judge, Charles Pyle, arranged for the golden anniversary celebration in the new Evo DeConcini U.S. District Courthouse where 150 current and former board members and staff recognized the achievements of SALA's past fifty years. All current staff were honored for their contributions to the program. Rose Marie Castro, SALA's Chief Financial Officer, is the most senior staff person, and she received a plaque for 33 years of service.

Professor Charles Ares remembered Legal Aid Society of the Pima County Bar Association in the 1950s and 60s. The wives of three law students including Jean Ares took over the running of the legal aid society in the summer of 1951 "in a little, kind of broom closet, in the Pima County Court House." The women interviewed the clients, categorized their problems, and "then, using a list that Tom Chandler and his friends on the Board had created, they started calling lawyers to ask them if they would take the cases of these people." Mainly through the efforts of Francis Wallace, who was one of the few women lawyers in the community at that time, the program succeeded. The legal aid program was funded by appropriations from the Pima County Bar, the United Community Campaign, and, according to Tom Chandler, Tucson's "large law firms" probably had four lawyers who also contributed. It was a month-to-month operation.

Professor Ares joined the Board in



Thomas Chandler shares his memories of 50 years of legal services in Pima County with Janet Napolitano, John G. Balentine and Hon. Thomas A. Zlaket.

1953 or 1954 when he succeeded one of his partners, Stewart Udall, who was elected to Congress. "I was the Junior Partner of the firm so I think I got his assignments to the legal aid society. Stewart Udall went to Washington, and I went on to greater things with the Legal Aid Society. It did reflect the highest aspirations of lawyers in this community. It is a professional obligation to provide legal services to the poor, at least to some extent and we did that. In 1963 the budget for the Legal Aid Society was \$14,700 which was a fairly remarkable sum I think to be gathered together from a small legal community. I think, there was a lot of political pressure, political unrest with the idea that poor people should be empowered in some way. If you were going to empower poor people you had to give them legal services, some access to legal services and so OEO [Office of Equal Opportunity], federal funding, came in, over the grumbling complaints by many members of this community - perfectly legitimate complaints that we were going to get federal controls if we got federal money. We hired lots of new young lawyers, a lot of new young lawyers from our law school and other law schools

came into the program."

Professor Ares went on to discuss the evolution of the legal services programs across the country. "I think it is a great challenge that we don't serve even half the people who need legal services, people who can't pay fees. It is a challenge that faces not only the legal profession which must provide the lawyers but the society generally that has to provide the resources. I am very proud of what Southern Arizona Legal Aid has done in this community. I had a very small part to play in it. Many of the people who have been members of the staff, directors and so forth are much more important, and have contributed much more to the success of Southern Arizona Legal Aid. But for all of us, I think it is a source of pride that for fifty years this organization has served the poor in this community. May you serve another fifty."

According to former executive director, Tom Berning, in the 1980s, attorneys like Bill Morris, Chuck Pyle, Bill Bacon, and Craig Gordon brought cases against several finance companies "where literally tens of thousands of low-income homeowners had their homes saved for them by SALA

lawyers." Additionally, Bill Morris initiated some of the most important litigation in Arizona regarding school finance and equal educational opportunities for low-income and non-English speaking children. Tom added that the partnership with the private bar has "meant the survival of the programs and enriched the programs and the community." Longtime SALA Board Member Professor Kenney Hegland remembered the clinical programs that he and Professor Andy Silverman started in neighborhood offices where they would have students working.

On behalf of the Pima County Bar Association, Past President Peter Akmajian accepted a plaque from SALA saying: "Obviously, the history of the Pima County Bar Association is very closely intertwined with Southern Arizona Legal Aid. During the late 1990's it was a very challenging time for SALA with really extreme cutbacks of congressional funding and SALA had to be very creative in its approach to survive as an organization, and I give all the credit to [the SALA] staff in making it through those tough years. It looks like the future is bright for SALA and it can rest assured that the Bar Association will be right there with it as it has been."

Today, 80 SALA employees serve over 1,000 clients each month from ten offices in nine counties and four reservations. SALA is committed to helping battered women escape abusive relationships, protecting tenants from unscrupulous landlords, helping seniors and the disabled obtain benefits to which they are rightfully entitled, aiding consumers victimized by fraud, and helping ensure justice for all on Native American Reservations. Last year the SALA budget exceeded \$4 million for the first time. With continued support from over 900 volunteer attorneys and generous financial contributions from the Bar, SALA will continue as a partner of the Bar for another fifty years.