

What We Do



By Thomas L. Cuni

Do you remember how you felt in the first days of law school? In addition to being afraid, my guess is that you thought about your future career in law. Our visions of the future most likely were centered on helping people by guiding them through difficult problems. Frequently, the reality of our work as attorneys does not provide the satisfaction of direct, observable results when we perform our professional duties.

The hundreds of attorneys who have participated in the Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP) have the opportunity to help others in a meaningful way and to experience the satisfaction of seeing the results of their work. Most of the referrals I have received have been for people whose financial circumstances were difficult but whose humanity and determination were admirable. The mix of personalities in my VLP referrals has been consistent with the mix of personalities among my paying clients: some pleasant, some not so pleasant.

Several years ago, I had a referral from VLP who was a most extraordinary person. He was 16 years old when he was sent to me for the probate of his parents' estates. The young man had lived in a rural area in a small, very old mobile home situated on a few acres of land. His father had shot his mother and turned the gun on himself in the driveway of their home. If it can be said to be a good thing, the father died before the mother. The sequence of their deaths allowed the

very modest estate to pass entirely to my young client. His father had, in a peripatetic life, left several children (all adults at the time of his death) from a number of prior wives who would have otherwise had claims on the modest estate.

My expectation that my client would be an angry and troubled teenager could not have been more wrong. He sat across the table from me at the initial interview and answered my questions in full declaratory sentences. He was oriented toward the future and did not seem to dwell on the incredible bad luck which had been a consistent part of his life. When I asked him about a problem he had at school, he readily acknowledged that having given a rude hand gesture to the principal probably was not the best idea he had ever had. The optimism and good humor of my young client turned what would otherwise have been a legal chore into a very satisfying experience for me as a lawyer.

In 1982 the Cincinnati Bar Association joined with the Legal Aid Society of Cincinnati to create the Volunteer Lawyers Project. In the years since it began, the VLP has provided thousands of the citizens of our community with access to legal representation that would otherwise have been denied to them.

Among its purposes, the CBA is "to improve the administration of justice..., and to provide law-related service and education to the public." Supporting the VLP is nearly a perfect fit for furthering these purposes. It is difficult to

imagine a better means of improving the administration of justice than providing competent legal representation to those who cannot afford to pay an attorney. Even the most energetic *pro se* litigant is, more often than not, confounded by the complexity of the judicial or administrative process. For our legal system to be effective, it must be viewed as being fair by the general public. Each time that a volunteer lawyer guides a person through the legal or administrative system, it improves our legal system and enhances the perception of fairness in our public institutions.

In the most tangible of ways, the VLP permits attorneys to provide law-related service to the public. For the attorneys who participate in the VLP, as you can see on the facing page, it is an opportunity to serve the profession and the community. To me, it also seems to be a satisfying opportunity to help someone who needs our skills and judgment. In my completely unscientific opinion, I believe that most people join the legal profession to be useful to, and to help, others. VLP gives us the opportunity to refresh our enthusiasm for the work we do and the profession we serve.

For those who have participated or otherwise supported the VLP, I thank you. For those who have not yet had the opportunity to participate, I invite you to do something that you will feel proud of having done. ■

Cuni is 2009-10 president of the Cincinnati Bar Association.