

Legal Aid Attorney of the Year Labors in a Region of Lost Industry

by Dawn Chase

The view from U.S. 360 heading up into the Northern Neck offers few clues to how life there has changed.

There are fields, stands of trees, glimpses of water: a landscape that long supported people who put their backs into their work farming, cutting timber, and fishing in the rivers and Chesapeake Bay.

But so much of that work is gone now. People whose families raised generations by harvesting crops, lumber, oysters, crabs, and fish are now working for minimum wage at the new fast food places and motels that cater to tourists.

A native of Westmoreland County described the struggle: “I see residents trek to a convenience store or service station with water bottles and trek home with them full, in the wheelbarrow. Car and car insurance long-gone. It’s bleak beyond description.”

It is in this region that, twenty-nine years ago, attorney John R. Rellick chose to use his legal skills to help the neediest people of the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. As managing attorney of the Tappahannock office of Rappahannock Legal Services (RLS), he is the sole legal aid lawyer for seven counties.

With his staff—paralegal Hope Bunch and secretary and “gatekeeper” (his description) Kim Wilkins—Rellick works, one client at a time to make sure they get a fair hearing in their conflicts with landlords, bill collectors, and bureaucracies.

On June 14, Rellick was named Legal Aid Attorney of the Year by the Virginia State Bar Committee on Access to Legal Services during the VSB’s annual meeting in Virginia Beach. He was nominated for the award by Bill

Botts, longtime executive director of RLS, now retired.

At the award ceremony, speaking to an audience that included legal aid advocates and Supreme Court of Virginia Chief Justice Cynthia D. Kinser, Rellick talked about his clients.

“There is a myth that poor people are poor because of their own personal failings, their ignorance, their laziness,” he said.

“[T]he majority are not like that. Very few people choose to be poor. They often find themselves poor as a result of circumstances beyond their control—poor health, parents who didn’t value education, traumatic experience in their upbringing, an abusive partner whom they haven’t been able to separate from, or a tragic accident. We’ve seen some clients who, before the current economic downturn, were solidly in the middle class. ...

“If my car won’t start one morning, I have another car that I can drive to work. If I get sick, I have sick leave that I can draw upon and health benefits that I can use to speed my recovery. I’m not likely to lose my job if my car breaks down or if I or one of my children gets sick.

“The poor whom legal aid employees see each day are not as lucky.”

The Tappahannock staff works out of a cozy white frame house, just around the corner from a car-title and payday-loan business on U.S. 360. In the tradition of small-town Southern law firms, they’re within a block of the courthouse.

Bunch, who handles Social Security disability cases, has worked with Rellick for seventeen years, and Wilkins for seven. Wilkins coordinates the few pro bono referrals to local lawyers who also

are struggling in the region’s downturn. She screens applicants for legal aid and other charitable services that coordinate with legal aid.

The three talk about the clients in context of their larger lives—where they live, other help they need, how they make their livings and serve their community, and the endless line of them.

Once, after she’d been there a while, Wilkins dreamt about a cat that was producing kittens. She tried to protect them, but as fast as she picked one up, another would appear. Bunch, on hearing about the dream the next morning, told her, “That’s legal aid.”

For her part, Bunch said that when she and her husband retire to bed and she starts to tell him the story of her day, he says, “‘Hope, I can’t listen to that before I go to sleep. I won’t be able to sleep.’ You have to develop a barrier between your heart and their problems.”

As Rellick accepted the award, he spoke to his colleagues from legal aid programs across the state, who all have witnessed growing poverty, less financial support, and layoffs in their ranks in the past several years.

“[I]f you let yourself become too emotionally involved in the problems of our clients, absorbing the sadness of each, one could easily become overwhelmed with that sadness. Some young legal aid attorneys become quickly burned out in that way.

“Those of us who have stuck around a while have been able to do so because of putting some emotional distance between our lives and that of our clients. ...

“But that wall or barrier should not be so impermeable that we can’t feel some sorrow, or in many cases some

respect and admiration, and even inspiration, from the struggles of our clients and their responses.”

Rellick also has coped by helping build the nonprofit safety net of his community. Quality child care, domestic violence and shelter programs, food projects—he has worked with all of them at one time or another. He has taken his turn as president of the Northern Neck Bar Association. He was selected one of George H.W. Bush’s “thousand points of light”—his name is on the roll in the Bush Presidential Library in Texas.

He serves as a guardian ad litem for children. In the legal aid community, he has a reputation as an “expert” in unemployment compensation law.

Over the years, Rellick convinced RLS to keep the Tappahannock office, despite declining revenues. The office is now open Monday through Thursday. Every year, Rellick and RLS Executive Director Ann Kloeckner visit the governing body in the region to plead their case to supervisors and council members for funding that helps RLS provide vital legal services to their constituents.

Rellick grew up in a coal-mining region of western Pennsylvania. He was raised Roman Catholic. He volunteered in legal aid clinics while earning his law degree from Northwestern University. His wife, Betsy Donoghue, is a developmental therapist for the local early intervention program.

He told the Access to Legal Services assembly, “The Hispanic client who tries, in his poor English, to explain to me how he was cheated by his employer, who did not pay him for his labor, could be my immigrant grandparents who came to this country from Eastern Europe in the late 1800s, not speaking English and being fearful to stand up for their rights, lest they anger someone who could cost them their jobs.”

His award includes a quotation he chose, by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, Michigan. The quote became associated with Archbishop Oscar



The Tappahannock legal aid team on the porch of their building. (Left to right) John Rellick, Kim Wilkins, and Hope Bunch.

John Rellick’s family was on hand to watch him receive the Virginia State Bar Legal Aid Award at the annual meeting in Virginia Beach.

Romero in his advocacy for the poor of El Salvador:

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,

a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and

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the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

RLS interns usually choose to do their service in Fredericksburg or Culpeper, where lodging is more plentiful and there's more going on. But RLS director Kloeckner has an ace in the hole when she tries to convince them to work with Rellick.

"I tell them, 'If you go down to Tappahannock, you'll be working with Atticus Finch.'"



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