

It Was in Her Heart to Assist, and She Has Done it Well

by Gordon Hickey



Elaine Javonovich was talking to her neighbor one day in 1999 about her neighbor's job.

That neighbor was Nina Olson, who at the time was the director of the Community Tax Law Project in Virginia, an organization she had founded in 1992.

Olson has since gone on to become the National Taxpayer Advocate in Washington, DC, but when she met with Javonovich that day, "She talked to me about CTLP and I thought, 'What is she talking about?'" Javonovich recalled. The CTLP is not the kind of organization that lends itself to a quick elevator speech. But Javonovich was intrigued and found out more.

And so it was in the summer of 1999 that Javonovich signed on as a pro bono coordinator. On May 1, 2017, she retired from the organization as its executive director, a job she had held since December 2003. For eighteen years, she has been at the hub of an organization that has helped uncounted low-income

people correct or eliminate tax bills that in many cases should never have been billed.

While the job offer at CTLP came somewhat out of the blue, it landed on a willing taker. Javonovich had a background in social welfare and had been running her own graphic design and typesetting business for sixteen years — a background in business that came in handy when she rose to run the CTLP. "What was always in my heart," she said during a recent interview in her former office, "was to assist people."

The CTLP staff and volunteer tax professionals assist about 1,000 Virginians every year to decipher the federal and state tax laws and solve problems they may have with the taxing agencies. CTLP works on behalf of taxpayers to untangle red tape and saves families money they may not have owed in the first place.

While anyone can run into questions from the IRS, not everyone has the money to hire a professional to help solve their problem.

The CTLP is often their only hope. The program handles cases involving innocent spouses, independent contractors, foreclo-

sures, denial of family credits, cases involving immigrants who often don't speak English, and more.

When asked to talk about her greatest accomplishment, Javonovich talks about getting through the Great Recession, when the agency was flooded with worried taxpayers. "Our board worked very, very, very hard getting us through the recession, because a lot of non-profits our size didn't."

Javonovich's successor, David Sams, agreed. "The people Elaine has been able to keep on the board allowed CTLP to stay at the level it has. Her ability is to right the ship through the years and still have these high-level experts still wanting to be involved."

The board includes nineteen lawyers and accountants, all volunteers. The board president, Flora T. Hezel, an assistant attorney general of Virginia, noted that the CTLP has "had its share of ups and downs, like any non-profit." But, she added, Javonovich has been there through it all, fighting for the program. "She has pretty much done the full gamut of things you can do at CTLP."

The CTLP has helped thousands of people out of tax jams over the years, but when

asked Javonovich and Sams cited two specific cases. In one, a board member represented a woman in an innocent spouse case — her spouse had stuck her with a tax bill she didn't know about and couldn't afford to pay. The case went to the Fourth Circuit, and the woman lost because the court had to follow the existing law.

But the legislature saw "that the law wasn't serving the way it should," Javonovich said, and the law was changed.

In the other case, Sams talked about a man who lost his job during the recession and was homeless. He wasn't receiving mail and didn't know he had a credit card debt that had finally been cancelled. Cancelled credit card debts are counted as personal income.

Eventually, the man got a job, moved into an apartment, and dutifully filed his taxes. He was hit with a small tax bill. The CTLP managed to get that bill erased through an insolvency exception, which the man didn't even know existed.

While the tax bill wasn't large, "It was crushing for him," Sams said.

It is that kind of memory of accomplishment that Javonovich will carry with her into retirement.