

LEGAL AID OF NAPA VALLEY

Former BASF Members Revive Vital Services

Susan Kostal

When the Legal Services Corporation, the private, nonprofit group created by Congress to administer government legal aid funds, consolidated some of its local providers several years ago, the Napa legal aid office came under the support and direction of Legal Aid of the North Bay, a merged agency based in Marin that is now called Legal Aid of Marin.

But the merger, or adoption, was not a happy one. Donors were not excited to see their funds go outside Marin County. In April 2003, Napa County Legal Assistance Agency, established in the 1960s, closed its doors due to lack of funding. It was the only legal services organization in Napa County. So Michael Holman, president of the group's board, and a small group of attorneys went to work.

Holman, a young partner with Napa's Dickenson, Peatman & Fogarty, reactivated the group's nonprofit status under the name Legal Aid of Napa Valley. The group had about \$50,000 left over from the administration of the old organization, a couple of board members, some donated office supplies, and little else.

Help soon came in the form of a request from the local vintners' association, Napa Valley Vintners. It had established a community health center for immigrants but found that many had no documentation and thus no way for applying for any medical aid. The vintners, who fund many social service programs through the annual Auction Napa Valley, asked the board of Legal Aid of Napa Valley for help in increasing immigrant access to health care.

Wanting to respond but not sure how, the board sought out Dan Corsello, executive director of the van Löben Sels/Rembe Rock Foundation. They hoped for his help and advice but didn't expect any money.

Corsello put them in touch with the Immigrant Legal Resources Center in San Francisco. Soon, they had the outline of a program in place and, shortly thereafter, funding from both Auction Napa Valley and van Löben Sels/Rembe Rock. Within a short time, the Napa-based Gasser Foundation joined in. "All of a sudden we had a budget of \$120,000," Holman says, still sounding surprised.



As the local community learned of the need, other backers stepped forward. Some were San Francisco attorneys who had weekend homes in the valley, like Karen Stevenson, a former Howard Rice Nemerovski Canady Falk & Rabkin partner. She had a house in Calistoga and agreed to serve as the group's executive director. "She brought us an enormous amount of credibility," says Holman. (Stevenson later returned to Howard Rice for a brief stint as chief legal officer to supervise the sale of Knight Ridder to McClatchy and now serves as interim president of the East Bay Community Foundation, though she remains on the board of Legal Aid of Napa Valley). "She gave a year of her life to her community and made a mark. She is one of the angels who came to help us. We couldn't have done it without her," Holman said.

Former San Franciscan Susan Schwegman, who closed her San Rafael litigation office when her law partner died and set up a solo practice in Napa, had sent a stickie note asking to be involved with Legal Aid of Napa Valley when she sent in her Napa bar dues. Holman promptly put her on the board, and today she is the chair of the development committee while also handling pro bono cases for Legal Aid of Napa Valley. "She had a lot of great connections in San Francisco," says Holman, and she was able to bring in support from Howard Rice and Lief Cabraser Heimann & Bernstein.

While Schwegman was in San Francisco, working in-house for Bechtel Corporation, she did pro bono work for a variety of legal service organizations, including VLSP's Homeless Advocacy Project. Schwegman said other board members, including Teresa Cunningham, also a former VLSP volunteer, also cut their legal services teeth in San Francisco before applying what they had learned to Napa. Stevenson learned some of her fundraising know-how and nonprofit management at Equal Rights Advocates, where she chaired the development committee.

It wasn't just city transplants, though they make up half the Legal Aid of Napa Valley board. Longtime valley wine lawyer and business advisor Ron Larson, former partner at Broad, Schulz, Larson & Wineberg and Steefel, Levitt & Weiss, also lent a hand in fundraising. Larson is the president of corporate affairs and general counsel at Trinchero Family Estates/Sutter Home Winery. Holman's law firm donated space at below-market rates, and his client, Thomas Keller at the French Laundry, donated a dinner. With sixty attendees (including attorneys from Howard Rice and Lief Cabraser) paying \$900 a pop (with all costs covered by Keller), the group's budget increased to \$350,000.

Within what seemed just months, they were a real legal aid organization with an executive director, a staff attorney, and an administrative assistant and paralegals. And the larger community responded. The group set up clinics and served food outside the local Catholic church after mass. When the priest announced from the pulpit that services were available, 250 people crossed the street to see what Legal Aid of Napa Valley could offer. The group now has three separate programs, focusing on services to seniors, immigrants, and those at risk of becoming homeless.

"If we weren't in a regulated industry, we would not make the money we make," says Holman. "As such, you owe the community in a way that most people who are in the private sector do not. Legal aid is a challenging cause to raise money for. Lawyers, and the bar association, have to be the main backers," he says. The Napa County Bar Association gives \$5,000 a year (it operates no legal service programs of its own), and the Napa County Women Lawyers Association has earmarked all proceeds from its annual dinner to Legal Aid of Napa Valley for three years running.

"The number one question all my funders ask is how much are the lawyers giving. Lawyers have to be the champions of the cause," says Holman. "No one else will do it."

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