



# BAR JOURNAL

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## Women in the Law

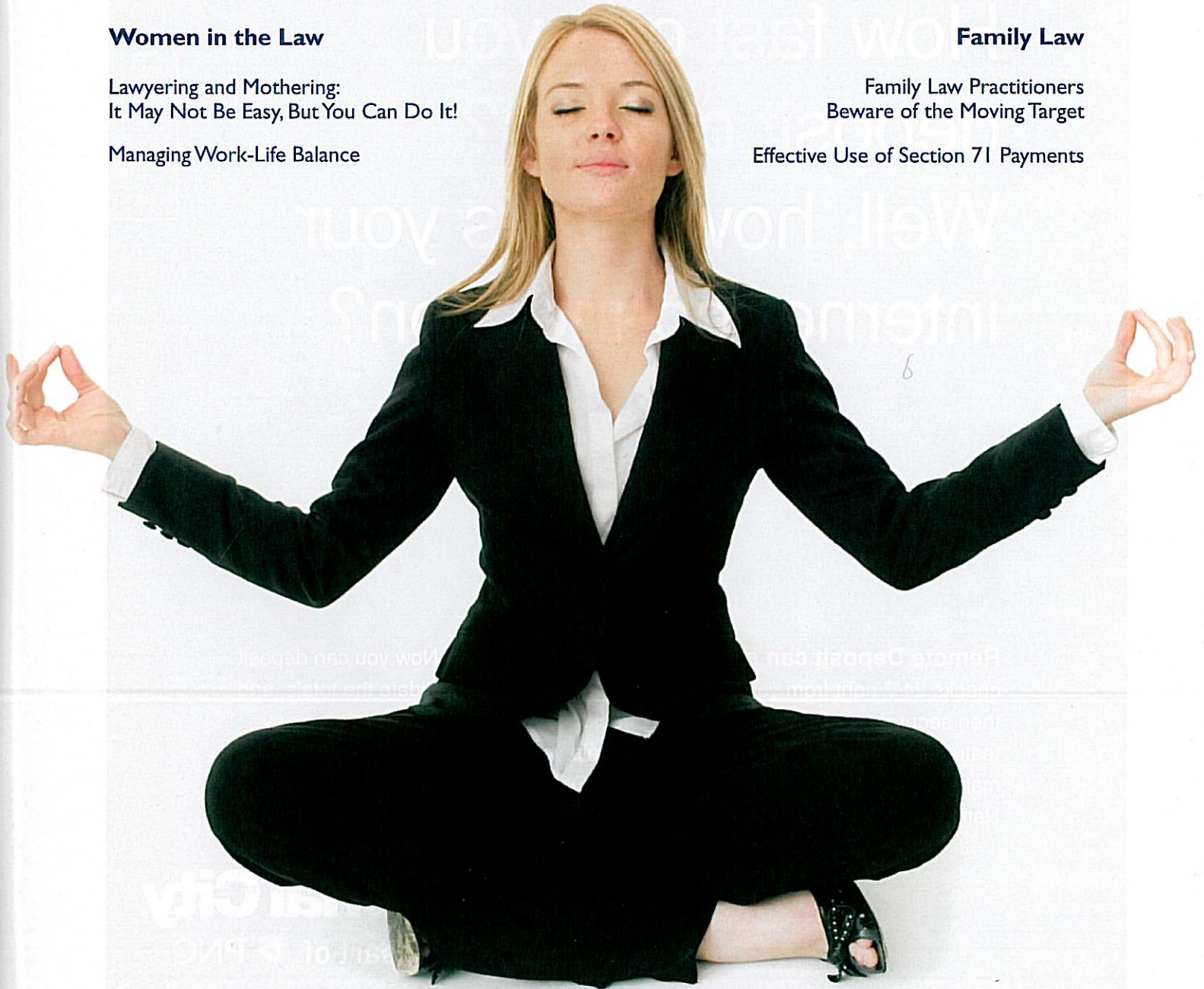
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# Partnering To Help Women

## Domestic Violence Prevention Project Brings Together Legal Aid Clients with Pro Bono Attorneys

WHEN SQUIRE, SANDERS & DEMPSEY L.L.P. asked how their firm might further expand pro bono efforts, The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland answered with a number of projects based on significant unmet legal needs of Northeast Ohio's poor. One proposal seemed to be just the right fit at just the right time – the Domestic Violence Prevention Project. Another dynamic partnership began, bringing together the energy and resources of a renowned private law firm with the well-honed expertise and passion of Legal Aid. Soon after, attorneys at Thompson Hine signed-on to provide additional pro bono support.

“What makes this project unique is that in addition to their financial pledge of \$240,000, Squire, Sanders & Dempsey committed considerable volunteer talent support through a 4-year partnership,” says Colleen Cotter, Executive Director, Legal Aid. So far, thirty attorneys, six paralegals and five staff members have committed pro bono hours to support this project. The generous funding has been used to create “The Samuel H. and Maria Miller / Squire Sanders Attorney for Prevention of Domestic Violence.” (The Millers are also providing financial support.) The named position is held by Alexandria Ruden, a Legal Aid attorney with more than 25 years of experience in domestic violence law. Ruden co-authors “Ohio Domestic Violence Law,” published by West, and is nationally known for her expertise in domestic violence law and the dynamics of domestic violence.

Training of the Squire Sanders volunteers began last September, with seven individuals completing the intense 3-1/2 hour session. In February, additional volunteers were trained in order to build a cadre of pro bono lawyers who can take on domestic violence case referrals and file civil protection orders for Legal Aid clients. Initially, it is projected that Squire Sanders attorneys will handle 35-42 cases every six months.

Cotter remarks, “When a firm comes to us and makes a commitment to address a particular issue, it gives them an opportunity to better know our clients through a depth of understanding that is greater than through random, unrelated cases. What an impact this type of partnership will have on the legal community and on women survivors of domestic violence.”

### Meeting An Unmet Need: Domestic Violence Prevention

“I remember thinking when I first started in this area that I might work myself out of a job,” says Alexandria Ruden. “I thought that in 15 years, this problem could be over.” Ruden soon came to realize that the problem of domestic violence would never be over. “This is a societal problem that needs a societal solution,” explains Ruden.

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) defines domestic violence as “a willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault, and/or other abusive behavior perpetrated by one intimate partner against another.” It is one person's use of power to control another. Overwhelmingly the majority of victims are women, with 1.3 million women nationwide falling prey to physical assault by an intimate partner each year. Around the state, the largest numbers of reports made to police departments are domestic violence. And in Cuyahoga County last year, more than 4,000 instances of domestic violence were reported; these are staggering statistics considering most cases of domestic violence are never reported to the police.

“All of our clients, because of their lack of income, have less of a voice than people with money,” says Cotter. “But for victims of domestic violence who also have low income, their voice has been taken

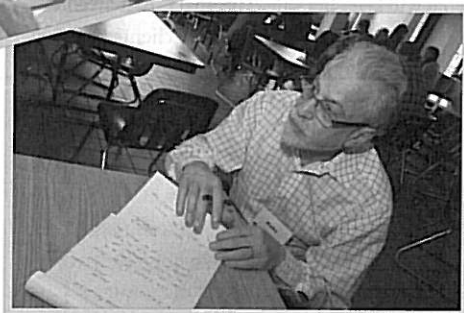
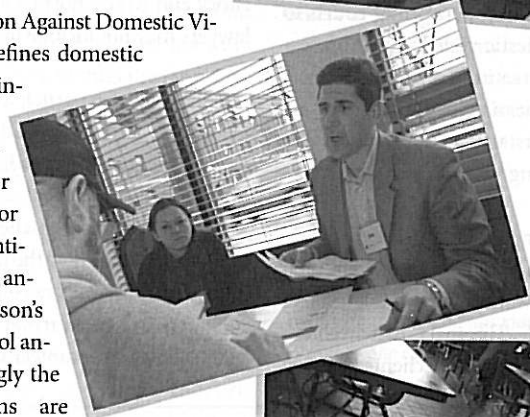
in their home. They have lost the ability to assert themselves because of the violence they have experienced. Having legal representation and helping them free themselves of that situation is important and often a turning point in that client's life.”

Seventy percent of Legal Aid clients are women, making it critical that Legal Aid have the resources needed to help women trying to



*Brief advice clinic last year with Squire, Sanders & Dempsey L.L.P.*

*From top: Michele L. Connell; Joseph P. Rodgers; Richard S. Gurbst*



break the bonds of domestic violence. Moving some cases to private attorneys builds Legal Aid's capacity. Ruden points out that having an understanding of the domestic violence survivor will help private attorneys in other areas of their practice. “Domestic violence affects housing, tax, immigration, will and trust, and everything else

that we do as lawyers," says Ruden. "If you don't know why a client is behaving in a certain way, then you really can't help that client."

To aid volunteer lawyers in understanding these complexities and to get them on board with the Domestic Violence Pro Bono Project, Legal Aid provides special training in assisting victims seeking civil protection orders from the courts. The training is fourfold. First, a representative from the Domestic Violence Center presents the dynamics by showing the faces, experience and pain of this problem. Ann McGowan Porath, managing attorney for Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program, helps to coordinate the training sessions and finds this particular presentation to be quite enlightening. "The perception that a victim of domestic violence would rush to get help is the wrong perception. It takes a while; it takes a lot of courage. They may not follow through the first or second time, or even the third or fourth time. So there's a patience that is required. Attorneys cannot get discouraged if a client misses an appointment. This is a typical scenario," explains Porath.

In the next leg of training, Alexandria Ruden provides a picture of the legal landscape and insights from her vast experience. Ruden has been involved with domestic violence law since Ohio enacted it in March 1979, permitting courts to grant victims of domestic violence civil protection orders and also creating a statute that allows for the crime of domestic violence. Since then, legislation and understanding of domestic violence has been ongoing.

"It is a very challenging area of the law. You have to weigh each case individually with clients and determine what she wants, what she needs and what will keep her safe. The goal is to help clients be violence free; however, some clients find that the best way to keep themselves safe is to go back to the abuser, go undercover, or do something you would not expect. The challenge is when to empower your client so that she knows how to make the right decisions for herself. Sometimes that means that you have to back off," says Rudin who has learned to measure success survivor by survivor.

The third part of the training is conducted by Joan K. Pellegrin, Domestic Violence Magistrate for the Domestic Relations Court of Cuyahoga County. Here, private lawyers learn the process and procedures of what will happen when they go to domestic relations court. This can be quite reassuring to attorneys who are entering new ter-

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ritory and whose normal activities as corporate lawyers may not include litigation.

Finally, pro bono participants hear from Volunteer Lawyers Program staff attorney, Mary Beth McConville, who acts as a liaison between the pro bono attorney, the Legal Aid program, the Legal Aid attorney, and the client. In training, McConville explains how the pro bono referrals will take place and avails herself as the point person for questions and further client follow-up requests from the volunteer lawyers.

Once this formal training is completed, pro bono lawyers are invited to team up with Ruden and shadow her on filing a civil protection order. Heather Tonsing Volosin, an associate at Squire, Sanders & Dempsey was the first pro bono attorney to receive a case from Legal Aid. "When Legal Aid works with a firm, they are incredibly helpful. They are organized and there every step of the way, which makes it easier for me to invite other attorneys to volunteer," says Volosin. "Many Squires Sanders attorneys had never stepped foot in Domestic Relations Court, and after the training gained a certain comfort level that they did not have before. A lot of people left the training feeling 'O.K., I can do this.'"

### A Long, Proud Tradition of Cooperation

Squires, Sanders & Dempsey has an extensive relationship with Legal Aid. "One of the things that especially attracted us about the possibility of becoming involved in the Domestic Violence Project is that it offered us the opportunity to address a social problem through both our lawyers' volunteer time and the firm's financial contributions," explains David Goodman, managing partner

Goodman encourages all private firms to go beyond their ethical obligation. "The Cleveland legal community is exemplary. Each individual attorney and each firm finds a way to achieve what we are achieving in this partnership with Legal Aid. There is certainly no lack of social and legal needs out there. We picked this one not because it is more important than home foreclosures or medical emergencies or children's issues. We should all use our resources and legal talents in a way that benefits a community that badly needs its lawyers as well as all the rest of us to address its problems."

To find out how you can be part of the Domestic Violence Prevention Project, or to participate in the Legal Aid Volunteer Lawyers program, call Ann McGowan Porath at 216-861-5332. ■