

# Celebrating a century of compassion

## Legal Aid Society helps thousands of Clevelanders

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C. Lyonel Jones arrived for his first day of work at the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland in the summer of 1966, three days after the start of fiery rioting in Hough.

The soft-spoken man with big hands was assigned to the society's new East Side office — a dilapidated storefront in Hough.

"As I approached the office that day, I had no idea what I was going to be called upon to do. I had no idea what I was going to encounter," Jones said last week. "I didn't realize the history I was going to witness, both at that point in time or during the next 39 years."

The Ohio National Guard was there. Police wore riot gear.

"People came to the Hough office seeking food vouchers and housing," he said. "I defended those charged with disorderly conduct and arson."

Once the violence ended, he joined with Lou Stokes of the NAACP and his brother, former Mayor Carl Stokes, to help rebuild the neighborhood.

Jones had to become a schmoozer, seeking donations for the society's work from "anyone with a pocket who would listen." Jones and Legal Aid are still schmoozing.

The society's largest money-making event ever is Saturday night. U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton will speak at a dinner-dance at the Cleveland Convention Center to celebrate the society's 100th anniversary.

"Nearly every major law firm in Cleveland quickly became sponsors of the gala, donating \$5,000 to \$15,000 each," said Legal Aid spokeswoman Melanie Shakarian. "This level of support from private firms has never happened before."

Not in the 100 years that Legal Aid has been in Cleveland. Not in the 39 years that Jones has been executive director.

Jones, 71-year-old son of a factory worker, grew up near Glenville High School and is not sure why he became an attorney. "Friends, timing, I don't know,"



LEGAL AID SOCIETY

Legal Aid Society attorney Claude Clarke meets with an immigrant family in a photo from the 1920s. This year is the organization's 100th anniversary.

he said.

Always self-effacing, Jones says that he has stood on the shoulders of the dedicated attorneys who came before him.

The first set of shoulders belonged to Isador Grossman, Legal Aid's only lawyer until 1912. In an annual report, Grossman wrote about immigrant clients.

"They are self-respecting but barely self-sustaining workmen whose weekly wage is their weekly bread and whose greatest wealth is their children."

Most of his cases involved wages, foreclosures, divorce and alimony, wage garnishments, immigration law and landlord-tenant disputes.

Grossman prevented seizures of furniture by "installment houses" charging 40 to 200 percent interest. He successfully argued against such rates, "saving borrowers many hundreds of dollars," he wrote in his 1907 annual report.

Then, too, he was winning alimony and child support for divorced or abandoned women — \$2.50 a week for one mother of two.

Those same human dramas were repeated through the Roaring '20s, the Great Depression of the '30s and the World War II era, as more attorneys joined the cause.

Federal money was available in the 1960s when Jones stepped aboard. And stayed.

More than 30 judges have launched their careers at Legal Aid, including Ohio Court of Appeals Judges Christine McMonagle, Sara Harper, Larry Gray and Patricia Blackmon; and federal Judges George W. White, Lesley Wells, David Snow and Jack Streepy.

The society has grown to 39 attorneys. They handled 8,500 cases affecting 21,000 family members last year.

More than 300,000 Northeast Ohioans qualify for free Legal Aid services, Shakarian said.

"Ideally, you should have one attorney for every 5,000 low-income [people] in your area. We have one for every 7,700," she said. About 8,000 people are turned away each year for lack of available attorneys.

Shakarian hopes Saturday's fund-raiser will help. "We hope to raise a quarter of a million dollars," she said.

Jones plans to leave Legal Aid in December, but retirement is not in the works.

"I'll keep doing law, for immigrants," he said.

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## Milestones in a century of aid for the poor by the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland

**1905** — The fifth Legal Aid Society in the nation forms on May 10 in Cleveland, financed by the social elite. Isador Grossman, its sole attorney until 1912, assists European immigrants with divorces and disputes with landlords, employers and loan sharks.

**1912, 1913** — Attorneys help create Cleveland Municipal and Small Claims courts that replace corruptible justices of the peace.

**1930-1959** — The society, led by Claude E. Clarke, helps Depression and World War II-era families in conjunction with new social service agencies.

**1964** — President Lyndon Johnson begins federal funding for Legal Aid Societies.

**1966** — The society's current executive director, C. Lyonel Jones, begins his first day on the job at a newly opened office in Cleveland's Hough neighborhood. The buildings around him are looted and burn during the Hough ri-