

Hope A. Cahill, T.C. Williams School of Law: Report to Virginia Law Foundation Regarding Summer Fellowship, August 27, 1995 (**editor's note: Rappahannock Legal Services (RLS) is now Legal Aid WorksSM**)

This summer, I came out of the ivory tower. I came out of the library, and out of the world of philosophical, circular, and political bantering among fellow classmates as to the meaning of justice. This summer, the law came alive for me. I worked for a Legal Aid.

Poverty law surrounded me as I worked as the Summer Intern for the Tappahannock branch office of **Rappahannock Legal Services**. From an educational standpoint, my summer experience was invaluable. This office, comprised of one attorney, one paralegal, and one secretary, handles hundreds of cases a year for individuals who cannot afford legal representation.

I interacted with clients every day. Often, I observed attorney-conducted interviews. After these interviews, the attorney and I discussed the merits of the case, the nature of the legal issues involved, the dynamics of the interview, and professional ethics. I attended judicial hearings, housing hearings, education hearings and unemployment appeals. I worked on cases involving child custody and support, truth in lending, landlord/tenant disputes, domestic violence, title disputes, debt, bankruptcy and consumer issues. I was also responsible for a substantial amount of factual research which ran the gamut from being knee-deep in courthouse deed books to successfully charting a course and retrieving information from the black hole of the Department of Child Support Services.

I represented clients at administrative unemployment hearings. Under the attorney's direction, I conducted the client interviews, researched and prepared the cases. I experienced for the first time the sinking, exhilarating, terrible, and wonderful feeling that attaches to the responsibility of representing someone. I understood the definition of advocate.

Legal issues took on human faces, names, and families. Over and over again, with each client that came into RLS came a desire to have someone listen to their problem. Clients sought representation by someone who understood the law, who could protect them from misuse of the law, and most importantly, who would be listened to by those responsible for adjudicating the law.

As I sat in Professional Responsibility on the first day of class, a fellow student predicted the demise of Legal Aid. I wondered how quickly he would suggest that a person who could not afford medical care perform his own surgery. I thought of the *pro se* clients I had observed in court. They interrupted judges, blurted out facts in such a way as to hurt their own interests, and lacked the ability to articulate their side of the story in any legally meaningful way. I thought about how easily they lost custody of their children. No doubt, many of RLS' clients would have been unjustly treated by landlords, phone companies, the Social Security Administration and the legal system as a whole without the legal representation afforded by RLS.

This summer reinforced my belief that the administration of justice in our current system of law requires access to competent legal representation. It requires more than an individual's right to represent himself. Practically speaking, a system created, maintained and controlled by lawyers, listens to lawyers. I am grateful for the attorney, paralegal and secretary who took the time to be my law professors this summer, and I am grateful for the opportunity to work with clients who taught me something more about life.