



James Popin, a kind of poor person's Blackstone as head of the Legal Aid Society, talks

about the success of the society after a year of operation. For the first time, he points out, the poor have access to

the courts and to legal advice, and it has meant a great deal to them.

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The Poor Gain Access To Santa Cruz' Courts

By Wallace Wood
Sentinel Staff Writer

He's the Blackstone of the poor.

That may be a little strong for James Popin and his staff of two attorneys, but they are doing something not done here before: bringing the law back to the common people.

The right to the services of a good attorney is an invaluable asset, worth more than it costs.

Even so, legal services cost too much in a nation founded on law and fair treatment in the courts; far too much for far too many people.

No wonder, then, that 1900 poor persons have come in the past year for legal advice to the Legal Aid Society of Santa Cruz County.

The society is run by Popin and his staff under an Economic Opportunity Commission grant.

The organization has the support of the County Bar Association, and over half the attorneys in town offer their services to the clients of the society, according to Popin. Though the attorneys don't charge, their time is figured as the one-fifth local share necessary to keep the \$80,000 EOC grant alive. Without local help, the federal government doesn't make money available. Funding for another year is expected shortly.

Use of public money irritates many persons. Popin admits heavy criticism came at the program after it first opened last December.

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Loose Dentures Shorten Life!

PHOENIX, Ariz. It has been reported that years of denture life can be lost due to loose dentures which slip and slide causing wear and breakage of plates. A new denture adhesive powder has been developed to counteract this slippage called Super-Dent. Super-Dent's "no slip formula" has a base which so closely resembles the feel and action of real teeth that users are calling it "foolproof." Super-Dent is already available in limited supply at drug counters.

cases were domestic relations—divorce, separation, child custody, and so forth."

Somehow, it didn't seem right to some people that the poor should be able to use the service for divorce actions.

"Poor people, like other people, want their marital affairs in order," argues Popin. "They are concerned about the legality of their lives and they are particularly concerned about their children."

The number of cases involving divorce has dropped off since, to about half the legal actions now taken by the legal aid office.

Popin theorizes the drop-off will continue. "For the first time, many of these people had access to an attorney. The old legal aid service handled by the local bar association didn't handle domestic relations cases, so there may have been quite a backlog."

With Popin are two recently-hired attorneys. Dennis Barrett works with him in the Santa Cruz office at 238 Locust Street. Francis Perry, who speaks Spanish, works out of 421 Lettunich Building in Watsonville.

Popin gets paid \$13,500 yearly as director of the program. The other two attorneys are in the \$11,000 category, which Popin regards as "average pay for attorneys of our experience."

The legal aid head admits he has an interest in the problems of the poor, but disclaims any selfless or pristine motives. He is a former deputy district attorney in this county, and explains he wants to "broaden my experience before I go into private practice." Popin does not expect to stay with the program

over a year or so "because it's just too much work."

While divorce cases are the most controversial side of the legal aid group's work, the range of practice is probably similar to that of other offices. Divorce cases make up an important part of many practices.

While divorce cases have fallen off, the legal aid office is asked more and more for "consumer protection" services, such as action in rental disputes, debt management, contracts and bankruptcy.

Poor people, Barrett remarks, seem more gullible to the promises of salesmen, and less capable of knowing their own money limits.

To be eligible for the legal aid service, a couple must make less than \$3000 per year, and not more than \$500 more for each child they have.

Yet Popin says many families owe \$2500 to \$4000 in bills "with absolutely no hope of ever paying them."

Worse yet, many employers will fire a man if his wages are attached by collection agencies. It's a descending spiral that makes families poor and keeps them that way.

Some firms make a specialty of fleecing the poor. This, Popin hopes to stop. In Watsonville, for instance, vacuum cleaners were sold to the poor on the promise the machines would cost nothing if the buyers would simply provide the salesmen with about 20 prospective clients. Of course, the "free" bill of sale signed for the vacuum cleaners contained a payment contract, and the families soon found they owed \$400 or more for the cleaners when bill collectors showed up.

Welfare problems and difficulties with cars also make up much of the society's work.

However, the legal group does not handle criminal matters, nor personal injury suits, since the public defender takes care of one and many attorneys will handle the personal injury cases on contingency fees.

"About half the people who come into the office don't involve us at all. We just talk to them and offer some advice," Popin says.

What this poor person's Blackstone would like to develop among the poor is a habit of seeing an attorney before they get into trouble.

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Zonds 5 and 6 made the first flights from the earth to the moon and back. The Soviet Union had not disclosed before that these were dry runs for a manned moon flight.

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"The primary function of a lawyer is to keep people out of trouble. This is what we would like to do during the next year. We want to try and inform and educate the poor, particularly in the consumer area."

He says he is still surprised to find many persons don't even know of the existence of the society, and for many others the first words they say when they come into the office are: "How much will this cost me?"

Popin and his staff seem to believe the program has been a success, despite the problems and criticism.

"We have given a lot of people access to the courts for the first time. Our judges are now their judges. Sometimes we find they don't even mind losing a case in court, simply because they have been heard."

"There's a tremendous respect for judges, and for the law," he concludes.

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