

Legal Aid girds for another 20 years

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WATSONVILLE — Jail overcrowding, domestic violence, opening college admissions to minority students and improving health care to the poor.

The list reads like a Who's Who of Social Causes for the '70s and '80s. But for the Legal Aid Society of Santa Cruz County Inc., it's a resume of the past 20 years of experience in the judicial system.

More than once, Legal Aid has bucked the tide of prevailing wisdom to take up the cause of the poor. In federal and state courts, the non-profit attorneys' organization has pursued its goal of equal justice for everyone — and won.

To honor the past two decades and rededicate their commitment to the future, the friends of the Legal Aid Society will be celebrating its 20th Anniversary with a dinner-dance Saturday night at Aptos Seascap. Tickets are \$25 and information about the event may be obtained by calling 688-6535.

Legal Aid's founding members, including Municipal Court Judge Richard McAdams and former Judge Charles Franich, will be at the dinner, as well as Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Carmel Valley, and local and state officials.

One of the guiding lights behind Legal Aid for the past nine years has been Executive Director Eleanor Eisenberg, a 46-year-old single mother of three who put herself through Glendale University College of the Law under less than ideal conditions. Her law school experience proved solid training for the years to come with Legal Aid.

"It gets discouraging because it's never ending. There are always more people with more problems waiting to get help," admitted Eisenberg. But the fire that burns inside her is the moral



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Executive Director Eleanor Eisenberg has been a guiding light for Legal Aid.

commitment to ensuring that everyone, especially the poor and downtrodden, gets "equal access to justice."

Under Eisenberg's direction, Legal Aid challenged Cabrillo College's minority student admissions standards in federal court in 1976, winning a policy to

open the community college to more Hispanic students.

In 1979, Legal Aid filed lawsuits in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties over the practice of requiring poor people who received health care to sign over their property as payment. While the liens "would have resulted in

people losing their property without a hearing, Legal Aid had both agreements reversed," said Eisenberg.

The group fought jail overcrowding at the old Front Street Jail in 1976, obtaining a ruling from U.S. District Court Judge Robert Peckham that the facility

was uninhabitable.

Three years ago it pushed for a medium-security facility for women convicted of relatively minor offenses.

And during the 18-month Teamsters strike against the former Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co., Legal Aid fought to get public-assistance benefits for the strikers.

With a staff of five attorneys, three paralegals and several clerical workers, Legal Aid has been working tirelessly to handle the crush of daily issues which comes through the door.

Eisenberg said the priorities are set by the community, through a survey that was done a few years ago to determine what civil legal services were in most demand by the poor. The four main areas are helping people obtain public benefits, landlord-tenant disputes, family law — which Eisenberg said "could keep the staff busy 80 hours a week" — and consumer protection.

More recently, Eisenberg said, Legal Aid has been successful in winning cases out of court over such issues as changing the eligibility rules for general assistance benefits which opened welfare to people without fixed permanent addresses.

Legal Aid's services are open only to the poorest of the poor, people "at or below the poverty level," said Eisenberg. Cliecept any fee-generating cases unless the case has been rejected by three other attorneys in the county.

Legal Aid receives its funding through grants from its parent corporation, the Legal Services Corporation, and from the State Bar Trust Fund and city and county of Santa Cruz. As always, the funding is under threat of being drastically cut back, according to Eisenberg.

Despite the challenges inherent in the kind of work it does, Legal Aid and its supporters are looking toward the next 20 years with renewed determination.