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Profile - Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada

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Responding to an ever-increasing need for pro bono legal services, the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada recently broke ground in downtown Las Vegas on what will become its new headquarters. Professor James Hagy, Director of The Rooftops Project, talks with Executive Director Barbara Buckley about the project and the role that the new facility will play in advancing the Center’s mission and its service to clients.

Every day, important work is done by an amazing and extensive team of staff and volunteer pro bono lawyers of the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada. The Center provides legal advice and representation across a broad range of topics—divorce, domestic violence, custody, children’s advocacy, bankruptcy, foreclosure, landlord/tenant, and consumer rights—to individuals who otherwise could not afford an attorney.

To accomplish all of this, the Center has a staff of 60, including 27 lawyers, plus approximately 1,000 volunteer lawyers. Barbara Buckley, Executive Director of the Center, notes that “the demand is just astronomical.” Barbara has led the Center since 1996. Until 2010, Barbara also served as a member and as the first woman speaker of the Nevada Assembly, its state legislature. The legislature meets for four months every other year, during which Barbara would take leaves of absence from the Center, which remains her focus today.

The staff conducts initial intake interviews, doing extensive screening for both financial eligibility and for merit. Then, both staff and volunteers provide representation to the clients who are accepted. Staff also provides training, mentoring, and guidance to the pro bono volunteer lawyers working with the program.

Another ambitious part of the Center’s work is providing legal representation of children in foster care in Nevada. “We started this program 13 years ago with a grant to hire one attorney and accepted our first case,” Barbara explains. “Thirteen years later, we have 10 full-time attorneys and 250 volunteers just on the children’s cases. That is what we received the new money to do.” The availability of the Center as a resource for foster children comes from the media, social works, and the courts. At any one time, the total number of children in foster care in the community is currently about 3,200. “Right now we are representing half the children in foster care. We are hoping if our existing money does not dry up or diminish, that with the new funding we will be able to represent every child. That is our vision.”

The Center owns the 11,000-square-foot, 1970s office building at the corner of South Eighth Street and Charleston Boulevard in downtown Las Vegas in which it currently operates. A typical day is at least seven to seven Monday through Friday, with early and late hours to accommodate clients, plus weekend classes.

As busy as the Center’s main facility is on a normal day, the buzz around the property is especially so now. Ground has been broken on a new 35,000-square-foot building next door on the same block, at South Eighth Street and Gass Avenue, where the Center plans to consolidate its operations. Like many real estate projects, the rendering of what will emerge from the construction looks enormously bigger than the modest physical lot on which it will sit.

Why does the Center feel that physical space is an important investment? Barbara outlined the reasons as we sat in the Center’s current offices just a few feet from the construction site. It is a story familiar to many not-for-profits offering social services, especially in the current times of increased demand from its client base.

“We have tripled in size in the last 10 years, so we have run out of room. When we moved into this building in 2001, we didn’t fill the second floor. And the...
bottom floor was occupied by another agency. Now this building is completely full, and a facility we have leased on Ninth Street is completely full. We have converted every file room, every kitchen, and we need additional space for attorneys. And we just received funding to add 20 new staff members.”

Operating a professional services organization from multiple locations has predictable challenges, particularly when interfacing with a broad base of clients in the community. “We are struggling to maintain one phone number, one single source for the clients to get us, one server so that when you type something here it will show up on the other side. Right now folks are walking back and forth, clients are walking back and forth, and we are completely full. So we had no choice but to look for new facilities.”

As a first step in the process, the Center acquired the lot to the south of their main building four years ago, just before the U.S. economic recession. Previously, it had been occupied by small bungalow residences and a few undistinguished storefronts.

The design process and the fund-raising efforts ran in parallel. Barbara led these efforts in addition to her other responsibilities. “We did preliminary designs in the very beginning so we could show the funders that we had a vision. We could show them what it was going to be.”

Like virtually every not-for-profit, the Center had to assess carefully how to proceed next when the recession hit. “We had raised our first million dollars but then it was slow going. We redesigned, separating the garage and the building, to shave a million or a million-and-a-half off the project. Originally it was two levels of garage and then the office building. We separated them.”

This change in the design plan afforded the Center a new benefit: the ability to continue to occupy its current facility until the new space becomes available, easing the transition for operational purposes. After the new building is complete and the staff has moved in, the existing building will be demolished and redeveloped as the site of a parking garage for the facility.

The project has also been enabled by a Las Vegas builder, architect, and developer, each of whom donated some services. With the redesign and first-stage capital in hand, Barbara and her team made a persuasive case for further funding.

“We went to a foundation and we said, ‘This is an opportunity. Costs will never be lower. Look at what we have now to offer; a building that would have cost this is now going to cost this. We have these free resources. Will you invest in us?’ And they agreed.”

The Lied Foundation Trust, which had generously supported the Center in the past, offered to contribute $500,000 immediately and another $500,000 in two weeks if the Center was able to attract matching dollars that quickly. They also offered another $500,000 in six months’ time, if once again it could
be matched. Barbara recalls the challenge. “And so we were very busy for two weeks. But we made it, and that put $2.5 million into the campaign, which then gave us more impetus to raise the rest.” Other leading Las Vegas foundations and individuals followed.

The new facility will not only be bigger, but will be designed specifically to support the Center’s operations. These include not only space for client interviews and for meetings of lawyers with the clients, but supporting functions. There are plans, for example, for a playroom, so that the children of clients can engage in cheerful activities while their parents or caregivers are getting advice. It will make a meaningful difference not only to the children, but potentially to the outcome of cases.

“Right now there is a small little corner in our lobby, but then when they go up into an advocate’s office, the kids will be in there with them,” Barbara observes. “Or once in a while another staff member will volunteer, because it is almost impossible to get the details of domestic violence while the kids are there.”

There is an active program of training and support for the many volunteer lawyers who are central to the Center’s success. “We have a full training and mentoring program associated with every one of our programs. We will have the judge come in, one of our lawyers come in, sometimes someone from the Department. We have a support lunch every other month, downstairs in our other conference room. We give a free sandwich to any lawyer that wants to come in and just chat about their cases, what they are seeing, they meet other pro bono lawyers.”

Barbara imagines offering these sessions in the new facility. “On the first floor, there is going to be a room that will hold 100, with a partition. Right now we hold all of our trainings for pro bono lawyers off-site, because we do not have any space to train the lawyers. So that is a huge plus. Especially evening hours, early morning hours, it is very difficult.”

The meeting rooms will impact not only lawyer training, but direct services and education to the Center’s client population. At the moment, weekly classes on various subjects, such as divorce and custody matters, are offered both in the Center’s building and off-site at the University of Nevada–Las Vegas. Barbara notes a typical, on-site weekly event. “Monday afternoon we have a class in custody in Spanish, and every space in the room is full. People are on folding chairs and it is very crowded, not very comfortable. So the training facility for the clients and for the pro bono lawyers is going to be amazing.”

Other improvements will be simple but have an impact. The design locates restrooms in the internal core and away from the office corridor. In the current building, several lawyer offices are adjacent to restrooms that see steady usage by visiting clients, their lawyers, and staff, who also note that the dated plumbing system is extremely loud. These disruptions will be gone when everyone shows up at their new facility.

As is often the case with not-for-profit organizations, supervising and coordinating the construction process comes as an adjunct responsibility for the same senior staff charged with running the operations. Even before the new facility project, it was a juggling act.

“We have an amazing administrator here, Terry Bratton. Terry has been with us since 1996. Like many not-for-profits, he wears many hats. He does our budgeting, our accounts receivable, and along with myself oversees our personnel. He will fix the sink if it is broken. Right now he is meeting with the development crew on the status of the building. He is finding parking for the construction workers. He is in charge of overall maintenance for the building. We outsource janitorial service, but it is an aging facility.”

Now, being the client representative in the construction process will be another shared task among Terry, Barbara, and Lynn Etkins, a lawyer and the development director of the Center. “We meet once a week. We have a task sheet. We are meeting with our development crew, and construction manager, and everybody involved.”

The group also interfaces on the construction financing. “Fortunately, we have a terrific pro bono lawyer working on our financing agreement. This is kind of a non-conventional deal, but we got very conventional documents,” Barbara adds with a smile.

Barbara also emphasizes how critical it is to have city and county support both for the organization and for the construction. “They have been a great partner of ours for a very long time. You know there is no metered parking, if you look along our street, because of us and our clients. It is an accommodation. You won’t see that anywhere else downtown. The city blocked off half of the street for us, so as to have a staging area for construction. Very, very helpful. Worth its weight in gold. They are good to us. We could not do it without them.” The project also benefits from CDBG (community development block grant) money allocated to Clark County and the City of Las Vegas by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Even with careful planning and successful fund development, any construction project will have its challenges. In the Center’s case, Barbara recognizes that one of those challenges will be parking while the building is under construction and the existing parcel, which will still be occupied, has not yet been converted to garage use. “There will be nowhere to park. We will probably take every open space, because we won’t have enough.” Fortunately, less than a block away an attorney who has parking spaces to serve a presently vacant building will make those available for no cost to relieve the demand.

One strength of the current two-stage development process is that if the new building construction schedule slips a little, the Center can remain in its existing space a little longer since it owns the property rather than having a fixed lease expiration or move date.

Barbara views this as a mixed blessing with drawbacks, too, in addition to the reduced parking.

“The downside is that the construction noise will be brutal for five or six months. There will be client inconvenience, trying to interview someone and how loud it might be. There really wasn’t any choice for us. We couldn’t move twice. We couldn’t afford it, and just the disruption would be incredible. So during that time, if someone wants to stay home because they are working on a case, that will be encouraged. Carpooling will be encouraged. We will
make do. As long as there is an end in sight, the legacy for the future cannot be overstated for us."

Just as other organizations with which we speak, the Center gave careful consideration to the shared aspiration of being “green” and incorporating sustainability in design, but being conservative with scarce capital dollars. Barbara shared her perspective on the process as it evolved in this project.

“Initially, when we started, we were going to be LEED certified, we were going to ‘go gold.’ But then the recession hit. And it probably would have happened even if the recession hadn’t hit. We are stewards for other people’s money.”

The new building incorporates energy-efficient choices in window and air-conditioning units, for example, and in the incorporation of direct light. But Barbara could not see her way to investing $50,000 for a consultant on sustainable elements. “That is a lot of money. That is a lot of service that would enable us to screen hundreds of people for pro bono service.”

The prospect of a capital campaign for the new building was also a catalyst to reexamine the branding and communications for the Center, even though it was long-established and respected in the Las Vegas community. Until the visioning and planning for the building project began, the organization had been named Clark County Legal Services.

The Center had the help of R&R Partners, the prominent advertising agency that among other accolades created the Las Vegas tourism campaign with the now-famous slogan (you know the one). “They have adopted us as a pro bono client,” Barbara says.

“They had their brilliant young executives do a brainstorming, ‘a swarm.’ One of the first things they came back to us with is, ‘Clark County Legal Services, what kind of a name is that? It doesn’t tell what you do. Sounds like you are with government.’ And why would anyone want to give money to government? So we did a survey of our clients, of our stakeholders, and of the judiciary. Most people thought we were part of government. We are a private nonprofit. We decided to change our name to the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada.

“R&R has been really invaluable. We realized that we could not raise money and go out there unless we had good-looking materials. We could tell our story crisply. It is amazing how professional our materials look. They really helped us refine our message.”

Note: The personal interview in this paper was edited for content and space.