

Community-Based Law Firm Grows in Harlem

By Rick Jones

For five years, an organization has been quietly building and growing right in the middle of Harlem. It's not a religious organization, although its employees are inspirational, it's not a restaurant, theater or church, although it nourishes the oppressed and lifts the spirits of the indigent. It is the Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem (NDS), a community based law firm for the people of Harlem.

NDS opened its doors on 125th Street in 1990 with a mission to provide the highest quality legal representation to the residents of Harlem, who, otherwise, might not be adequately served by the legal community. The work of the office is primarily criminal defense, ranging from representation of those charged with only minor offenses to those alleged of having committed the homicides that leap out at you from the front page headlines. While most of the work is criminal in nature, the office does a significant amount of civil work, work that flows directly from the criminal practice, such as police brutality cases, forfeiture proceedings in housing court and matters arising in family court.

The Neighborhood Defender Service focuses on the clients and their families and not judges and their courts. In criminal practice, for the indigent the concept of early intervention is virtually unheard of. Early intervention means the ability to enter a case at its earliest states, often pre-arrest, before the police and the prosecutors and the judges, and before the damage to the client is done. NDS is available around the clock, seven days a week. Clients are encouraged to call before they are arrested when possible so as to have counsel available at critical stages of the case and before it gets to a judge. NDS tries to assist clients in the interrogation stage where damaging statements can affect the outcome of a case.

Staff members conduct Outreach and Education programs whose primary function is to speak to community groups, tenant organizations, churches and others informing them of the availability of NDS as well as their rights when encountering the police. An award-winning program, "Conflict with Cops," involves going to schools in the community and teaching the kids how to respond properly when approached by police officers so as not to engender hostility or escalate already tense situations.

A unique feature of NDS is "aftercare."

In most cases, lawyers providing help for the indigent can only help with the immediate problem and not underlying personal and social problems that created the need for legal help in the first place. NDS believes that once a client, always a client, and continues to assist people in aftercare with their personal, housing or family needs, long after litigation is over.

Another unique feature of NDS is the "team approach." Each team consists of a senior attorney, three staff attorneys, two investigators/community workers, a legal intern (law student) a college intern and an administrative assistant. There are five teams that do primarily criminal work; a sixth does primarily civil work. The team approach means that no client is ever represented by only one person; and that there are many creative ideas brought to each case by individual team members. It also means that the client can call the office any time and find someone familiar with their case.

NDS' greatest asset is its people. The organization hires only a handful of lawyers each year. They are trained by a senior attorney whose only responsibility is to look after their development. The office is run by Leonard Noisette, a career defense attorney with a distinguished record. A successful trial and appellate lawyer before coming to NDS, he was the first African-American supervisor at the Legal Aid Society Criminal Appeals Bureau.

Cathy Plaza and Eddie Ellis are also crucial to the success of NDS. Ms. Plaza is Chief of Social Work and is responsible for overseeing all the social service provisions including the aftercare service. She is currently the chairperson of the New York City Coalition of Black Social Workers. Eddie Ellis is the Coordinator of Community Education operating under the auspices of the Outreach and Education program. He is responsible for informing the community of NDS' availability, teaching the "Conflict with Cops" program and running the "Know Your Rights" program for Harlem youth. ■

Rick Jones is a senior attorney at the Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem.

NACDL Nuts & Bolts Seminar: DEFENDING ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMES CASES

April 18-19, 1996 • Hotel Nikko • Atlanta

Topics Include:

The Elements of the Crime: RCRA
Charles W.B. Felt

Clean Water Act
& the Best of the Rest
John Cooney

Parallel Proceedings Problems
Judson Starr

Seizing the Offensive: Acquiring the
Facts and Managing Disclosures
to the Government
David Eldridge
Thomas J. Kelly
Chris McAllister
Robert Tarun
Larry Thompson

Ethical Questions Arising in Early
Stages of the Case

David Krakoff
Baekia Jordan

How to Try the Case

David Bancroft
Thomas Green
Gerald Krovath
Gary Lincenberg

Plea Bargains — Making the Most
of a Negotiated Settlement
Impact of Voluntary Disclosure
and Audit Privilege Laws

Tom Downs
Jim Moore

Spin Control: Dealing with the
Media as Friend or Foe

Rikki Kleiman
Wayne Pines
Joe Whitley

The Science of Environmental
Crimes and Challenges to It:
Examination of a RCRA and
Clean Water Act Case

Constance Courtney
David Marshall
Glenn Millner
Monroe Whitesides



Program available soon

To register call: Melissa Scott

NACDL-1627 K Street NW, Suite 1200-Washington DC 20006
202 872-8688 • FAX 202 331-8269