

# New legal clinic lawyer champion of the underdog when law becomes 'complicated and intimidating'

Haltom Hills legal clinic lawyer David Craig looks out for the little people.

Realizing that the average person finds law complicated and often intimidating, Mr. Craig advises his mostly middle and lower income clients on how to take an issue to court and whether the case is strong enough to stand a good chance of winning.

The newest member of the clinic's three person staff—community legal worker Peggy Balkind and secretary—make worker Sylvia Oprica are leaving the Wesleyan

Street offices next month—Mr. Craig replaced lawyer David McKee three weeks ago. Mr. McKee, who arrived in Georgetown last April, was the first lawyer the clinic had in its three-year history.

Much of Mr. Craig's time is spent advising or acting on behalf of his clients on a variety of problems, mostly associated family difficulties, money woes, landlord and tenant disputes and misunderstandings over pension cheques, workman's compensation benefits and unemploy-

ment insurance payments.

A University of Western Ontario law graduate, called to the Ontario Bar Association last spring, Mr. Craig said that the popularity of the local clinic necessitated the hiring of a full-time lawyer for the first time this year.

"The subject areas are different than those of a law firm," he said. "They deal with real estate law, corporate-commercial law, personal litigation, estates, and divorce law. We don't do any of that."

Recent progressive legislation aimed at clearing away "centuries legalistic stuff that was clogging things up" had made small courts more and more accessible to the average individual with a little help from a clinic lawyer.

But while people have at least some acquaintance with the lawyer, Mr. Craig said, lower income individuals tend to be less aware of their rights.

"When faced with a legal problem, they are quite surprised to find that they can do something about it," he said. "Legal clinics have been help-

ful and they're growing rapidly. There's one person on staff at Legal Aid offices who handles just the affairs of legal clinics operating in the area.

Especially disturbed to find that young people "lack even a minimal understanding of the law", Mr. Craig said some basic concepts of jurisprudence should be taught as part of a balanced school curriculum, and suggested that youngsters could use role playing or acting to help them understand what the law means.

To encourage local adults to come to grips with various aspects of law, Mr. Craig said he would like to organize a series of seminars. Although no concrete plans have been organized, he said he would like to see some short workshops on the legal complexities of buying and selling a house, family law and consumer advocacy.

Small claims court should be used more, he said, adding that many individuals, through sheer ignorance of their rights, often fail to take clear breaches of the province's consumer laws to court because they're afraid of the procedures involved.

Because Mr. Craig's work with the legal system is mostly advisory and centres largely around small claims actions, the legal clinic differs from "legal aid" which individuals seek out if they are about to be taken to court or wish to have a case heard at a higher judicial level.

While people can apply for legal aid at the clinic, Mr. Craig said, they must take a financial means of examination to determine if the applicant is eligible for free legal help.

If the application is accepted pending an assessment of liabilities and assets, the client's lawyer's fees will be absorbed by the province under the Ontario Legal Aid Plan, a program which in turn is sponsored by the federal government.

However, while the bulk of lawyer costs may be paid for by the province, charges or fees on property matters or incidental document costs may have to be picked up by the client even though the person may be under the legal aid scheme.

Mr. Craig, who spends about every second day in court in Brampton, Etobicoke or Milton, lives with his wife and two children in Mississauga. His wife, Elizabeth, is the registrar for Oakville's Sheridan College.

# Best solutions often found outside courtroom: Balkind

If there is some way of keeping a problem out of court, Peggy Balkind can probably help you find it.

A now-familiar face to many Haltom Hills residents, Mrs. Balkind has been the local legal clinic's community legal worker ever since the office first opened Oct. 31, 1977, in a small coat room at St. John's United Church on Guelph Street. But after three years of service, Mrs. Balkind is stepping down and taking with her some fond memories.

Mrs. Balkind, an 18-year resident of Haltom Hills, says her background knowledge of

the community (she is president of the board of directors of Haltom Women's Place and is also involved with the Haltom Children's Aid Society and the Contact Centre crisis station) has helped her handle some of the problems people bring to the clinic which don't necessarily have to wind up in court for a satisfactory resolution. Often, she deals with problems concerning old age security payments, disability, welfare and unemployment insurance.

"As a community case worker, you hope you can negotiate so you never get to

court," she told The Herald Monday. Landlord and tenant disagreements, for example, she said, can be resolved properly by advising both parties of their rights in the dispute.

"Many tenants are frightened and won't stand up for their rights," Mrs. Balkind said. "It's a vast area of the law of which people just aren't aware and the clinic seeks to educate as part of its mandate."

While she works closely with new clinic lawyer David Craig, providing background information and assistance, Mrs. Balkind said she spends most

of her time doing community work, helping people "plug into" agencies such as family counselling for help.

"Sometimes people call and they don't know what they need," she said. "And many don't realize that they have a legal problem. If they're turned down for welfare they may not understand that there is an appeal procedure which they can go through."

"It's been a challenge," Mrs. Balkind said reflecting back on the years she has been with the legal clinic. "But it's very nice when you're able to help people."

# Secretary first contact for clients

Usually the first person people have talked to at the Haltom Hills Legal Clinic has been Sylvia Oprica, but by the end of the month there will be a new face behind the front desk at the clinic's Wesleyan Street headquarters.

As the clinic's secretary and intake worker for the past two and a half years—the office was opened three years ago—Ms. Oprica's job, along with the usual secretarial duties, involves gathering initial information from the person looking for legal advice.

"Most of the people who come in here are looking for advice," she told The Herald in an interview Friday. "You have to establish if, in fact, they do have a legal problem and then get some information around it."

Often it is a matter of figuring out how to proceed with the problem, Ms. Oprica said, because whether or not the person realizes it, the difficulty may be better handled outside the courts by another agency.

"It may mean finding out what they feel the problem is," she added, "so that we can direct them to an available person for advice. We have to decide where the best place is for the person to get assistance."

The clinic frequently sends people to other agencies such as credit and family counselling services for further help and it receives many inquiries concerning welfare cheques and applications, pensions and workman compensation payments and regulations.

While an appointment with the clinic is not necessary, it may result in more prompt attention.

"We get lots of people who just drop in and lots who phone," Ms. Oprica says. "It

happens both ways and we try to work them in as best as we can."

Ms. Oprica, who is about to move to Kingston, said she has enjoyed her work with the clinic, and it has provided her with a regular opportunity to meet people on the job.

"There is much that I know now that I didn't know before," she said. "It's important to keep up with the changes that occur within the law."



BANG THE GAVEL

A future mayor of Haltom Hills? Could be. Eleven-year old Haley Aljoe attended Monday's general committee meeting and stayed for the duration, an admirable feat many adults wouldn't face. After her citizenship badge with the First Acton Girl Guides, Haley will have to digest what she learned Monday night and report back to her guiding companions.

(Herald photo)

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## Come to Church

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