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

Haiton 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 choic's three person staffcommunity legal worker Peggy Balkind and secretaryintake worker Sylvia Oprica are leaving the Wesleyan

If there is some way of

Pegay Balkind can probably of Halton Women's Place and

A now-familiar face to many Children's Aid Society and the

keeping a problem out of court.

Halton 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 stepp-

ing down and taking with her

Mrs Balkind, an 18-year

resident of Halton Hills, says

her background knowledge of

Secretary

for clients

! Usually the first person

people have talked to at the

Halton 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

. 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, invol-

wes gathering initial information from the person looking

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

. 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 handl-

ed outside the courts by

. "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

Ior the person to get assist-

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

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

"We get lots of people who

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just drop in and lots who phone," Ms. Oprica says. "It

payments and regulations.

attention.

headquarters.

for legal advice.

around it."

another agency.

first contact

some fond memories.

help you find it.

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 tennant disputes and misunderstandings over pension cheques, workman's compensation benefits and unemploy-

the community (she is presi-

dent of the board of directors

is also involved with the Halton

Contact Centre crisis station)

has helped her handle some of

the problems people bring to

the clinic which don't necessa-

rily 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,

worker, you hope you can

negotiate so you never get to

happens both ways and we try

to work them in as best as we

Ms. Oprica, who is about to

move to Kingston, said she has

enjoyed her work with the

now that I didn't know before."

she said. "it's important to

keep up with the changes that

meet people on the job.

occur within the law."

"As a community case

Best solutions often found

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 biring 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

Recent progressive legislation aimed at clearing away "centuries legalistic stuff that was elogging things up" had made small courts more and more accessible to the average individual with a hitle 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 helpful 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 cirriculum, 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 beeause 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

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

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 Ald 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 liens 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

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



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."

into" agencies such as family "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



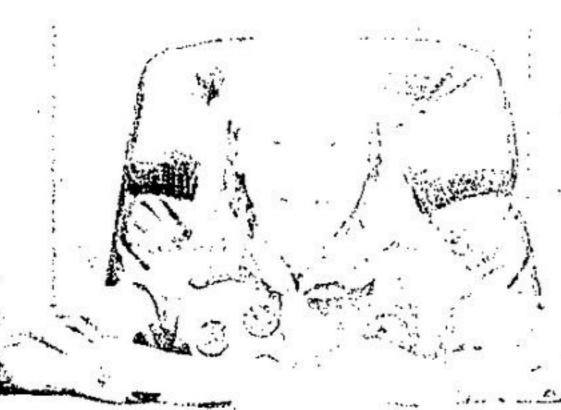
## BANG THE GAVEL

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

## clinic, and it has provided her with a regular opportunity to "There is much that I know

Haley Alloe attended Monday's general committee meeting and

(Herald photo)



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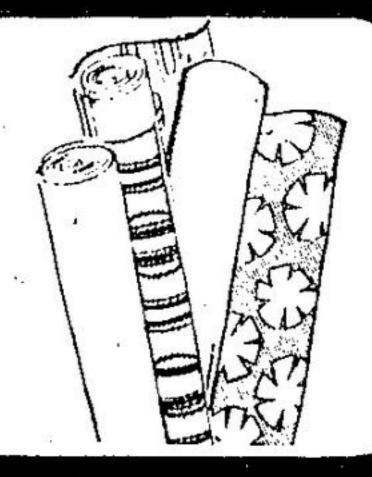
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