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Editorial

Helping the helpers

Shortly after marrying him 10 years ago, 28-year-old Jennifer Ryan Bell says she suffered repeated beatings from the man who is now her ex-husband.

Despite expressions of remorse after kicking or strangling or slapping her with the back of his hand, she recalls, he would do it over and over. On one occasion, she says, he pinned her to the floor and almost beat her unconscious.

On another, he struck her with a telephone receiver. In still another, he tightly wrapped his fingers around her neck and nearly suffocated her. She was seven months pregnant.

"I was stuck," she says of the cycle of abuse. "I didn't know where to turn."

Someone in an Asheboro women's shelter suggested that she consider Legal Aid, a statewide nonprofit law firm that serves the working poor. Attorneys there helped Bell win a custody battle for her son. They filed domestic violence protective orders on her behalf. They also handled her divorce case. "The support they gave me was unreal," she says.

So grateful was Bell for the assistance that she volunteered for a while as a receptionist in the

Legal Aid office on North Elm Street. Bell's story is hardly unusual.

Approximately 135,000 people in six counties are eligible for help from the Greensboro office of Legal Aid. But it has only 11 Legal Aid attorneys on staff. For every two clients Legal Aid is able to serve, it must turn away eight.

At the same time, demand is growing. Between 2000 and 2005, the number of families in Greensboro living below the poverty line surged by a staggering 69 percent.

Court-appointed attorneys for the poor are provided only in criminal cases. For such cases as domestic abuse, landlord-tenant disputes, child custody, Social Security claims and discrimination, they must fend for themselves.

And as many of us know, navigating the justice system without a lawyer can feel like driving West Wendover Avenue at rush hour -- while blindfolded.

But Legal Aid benefits more than the individuals who are direct recipients of its services. The agency helps relieve pressure on overburdened court dockets by resolving more than 70 percent of its cases without going to court.

It also reduces such community problems as homelessness and domestic violence. The majority of Legal Aid's cases (36 percent to 43 percent) involve family law.

Against that daunting backdrop, Legal Aid is mounting a fundraising effort to help defray expenses and to provide more legal services to more people. The agency receives funding from the federal Legal Services Corp., the state, foundations and United Way. Part of that help logically should come from the legal community in both dollars and donated services.

But Legal Aid also needs help from the rest of us. So more stories like Jennifer Ryan Bell's can end in triumph, not tragedy.

"They gave me resources, they gave me people I could talk to ... support groups," Bell says. "They saved my life. They saved my child's life."

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