

THE UNBEATABLE ADVOCATE

Third Edition

Winter 2010

Vol. 1, Issue 3

Welcome! This is the third edition of the newsletter for client board members of Massachusetts legal aid programs.

This issue focuses on the experiences of clients at the National Legal Aid & Defender Association (NLADA) Conference, which took place from November 10th through the 13th in Atlanta, Georgia.

On the right, you can see what's lined up in this issue for you – updates, profiles and client perspectives from around the state. Enjoy!

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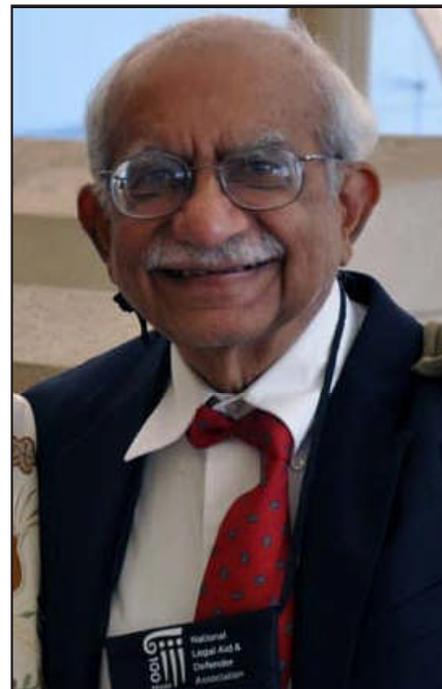
Send in Submissions!

Meet Shams Mirza, NLADA Attendee and Client Board Member

By DAVID PEARSON

Shams was one of three client board members awarded a scholarship by MLAC to attend the National Legal Aid & Defender Association (NLADA) Conference in November. Born in Bombay, India, Shams has had a variety of cultural and professional experiences throughout his life, including attending the business school at MIT, which originally brought him to Massachusetts. "I am lucky to know several languages and cultures, which helps me to be sensitive to the nuances of different people," Shams says.

In 2008, Shams became a board member at Greater Boston Legal Services (GBLS). He is currently chair of the GBLS Client Caucus. Shams says meeting the former Chief Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, the Honorable Margaret H. Marshall, inspired him to accept his nomination as a GBLS board member. "The Chief Justice's passion for equal justice moved me, and I agreed to be on the GBLS board," Shams recalls.



NLADA 2010 Attendee and Chair of the GBLS Client Caucus, Shams Mirza

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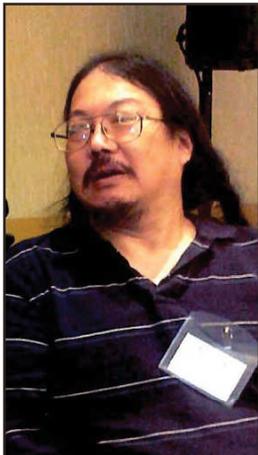
Client Board Members at NLADA: In Their Own Words

Betty Agin, Western Massachusetts Legal Services

"NLADA was a great experience for me; I was amazed at all the great work they are doing in my home state of Georgia. While I was there I got to meet a lot of people doing the same work we are doing in Springfield, and network with clients from across the country."



Timothy Lee, Volunteer Lawyers Project



"I've been to two NLADA conferences so far, and also attended the leadership training in July. It has been very valuable to me in increasing my understanding not only of the law and legal services generally, but also of how legal services and social services both work to help lower-income people and people with disabilities."

Meet Shams Mirza

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For Shams, the opportunity to attend the NLADA conference in Atlanta was an experience he is grateful for. "NLADA gave me the chance to meet and learn from advocates from other parts of the country," he says.



From left to right: Jacquie Bowman, Deputy Director of GBLS, Rita Dixon, GBLS Board member, Betsy Soule, Executive Director of MWLS, Mary Moore, VLP Board member, Bob Sable, Executive Director of GBLS, Sheila Hubbard, Executive Director of VLP, James Haley, GBLS Board member, Catherine Harris, GBLS Board member, Shams Mirza, Chair of GBLS Client Caucus

Strategic Planning Update

By Lonnie Powers, Executive Director of MLAC

MLAC's strategic planning process continues to move forward. The Planning Committee identified 3 task forces to develop recommendations for the MLAC Board on the following topics:

1. Planning-Delivery Systems
2. Leadership Transitions
3. Communications.

There were three client board member representatives on the Planning Committee: Myrnairis Cepeda (GBLS), Ann Leavenworth (WMLS) and David Pearson (VLP). Each task force will have one of these representatives and several other client board members in addition to representation from the program directors of MLAC and LSC-funded programs and the MLAC Board and staff. It is anticipated that the task forces will conclude their work by the end of March 2011.

The Betty Agin Fire Fund

On November 24, a fire destroyed WMLS client board member Betty Agin's home. The Betty Agin Fire Fund has been established at PeoplesBank. Donations may be made to:

Betty Agin Fire Fund
1900 Wilbraham Rd
Springfield MA 01129
attention Roseanne Partridge
782-1922; fax 782-0051

You can also make a donation at any PeoplesBank.

Remembering James Haley



It is with great sadness that we report the passing of James Haley, a GBLS Board member who also served as Senior Volunteer at Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services. As a volunteer receptionist, James treated each caller with respect and patience. Last month, James organized a collection at GBLS for books to be sent to prison libraries.

As a Board member, James was very involved in the GBLS Board Client Caucus Committee and sought to maintain legal aid services.

James was a scholarship recipient at NLADA this year. He will be remembered as someone who was dedicated to GBLS and their clients.



NLADA 2010 Attendees, left to right: James Haley, Mary Moore and Shaquella Butler

Report on the Access to Justice Commission

By ANN LEAVENWORTH

On December 2, the first meeting of the Client Communication and Outreach subcommittee of the Legal Services Committee of the Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission was held in Springfield. The subcommittee was established to research ways for clients to communicate and for the ATJC to reach out to the client community. At the first meeting, twelve members were present, including clients, legal services attorneys, and two members of the Hampden County Bar Association.

The subcommittee discussed issues such as maintaining a client network, working with community agencies and Legal Services to develop self-help and lay advocacy programs, and setting up a system to support clients who must go to court without a lawyer. Jacqui Bowman, Deputy Director of Greater Boston Legal Services, explained that the subcommittee is so important because along with gathering client information and providing training and resources, it will bring the client voice to the Commission.

The subcommittee has set the next meeting date for February 3, 2011. We will decide at that time on goals and the best methods to reach them. Please contact me if you would be interested in working with the subcommittee.

Ann Leavenworth is the client representative on the Access to Justice Commission. She is also a board member of Western Massachusetts Legal Services. You can send her feedback at 521 Hancock Street, Springfield, MA 01105, 413-736-0042, or holyfamilyrectory@verizon.net.

Something to Share?

Then send it in for the next *Unbeatable Advocate!* All photos, submissions, comments, and news tips can be sent to David Pearson at dpearson@shawmuteducation.org. Robbie Adjei will also be handling submissions and content.

If you have any questions, you can call David at 617-304-4035 or toll free at 877-625-0282. The next *Unbeatable Advocate* will be sent out in the spring.

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Reflections on NLADA: Learning More about the Homeless

BY ANN LEAVENWORTH

One of the best workshops I attended at the NLADA Conference was on homelessness. Homelessness has increased since the 1990s, especially among families with young children. One of the issues I found most interesting is that many of the adult homeless have mental issues. It is very sad to note that in a report done by the U.S. Interagency Council on the Homeless (USICH), it was found that 23% of the homeless population are veterans.

At the NLADA workshop, I learned about how the homeless population has to constantly deal with laws restricting panhandling, loitering, and camping or sleeping in public. They also find their human rights violated and are harassed, arrested, and have their property destroyed. Legal services, working with the ACLU and others, have taken on these issues in many locations. Some changes have been made in the observance of basic human rights.

However, individuals who are homeless still have problems with obtaining legal help. One of the

reasons is that many who are homeless do not feel comfortable walking into an office. Also, cell phones are out of their financial reach and they cannot use that method to contact a legal services office. These problems are compounded when there is a lack of English or citizenship.

Some of the legal problems the homeless population faces include problems with social security and SSI, veterans' benefits, health care access, property rights, tax issues, and access to shelters and stable housing.

Because of the economy, this is unfortunately not a time for legal services to add staff to work with the homeless. But if clients, community agencies, and organizations could work together to have lay advocates first listen to the individual, and then explore the issue to discuss with a lawyer, then perhaps we could ensure that the homeless population's legal rights are better enforced.

You can send Ann feedback at 521 Hancock Street, Springfield, MA 01105, call her at 413-736-0042, or email Ann at holyfamilyrectory@verizon.net.