Consortium for the National Equal Justice Library

Oral History Collection interview with

John Levi

Conducted by Alan Houseman
Feb. 5, 2025

John Levi:
Hello.

Alan Houseman:
This is an oral history of John Levi, who's chair of the LSC Board of Directors. This is a Zoom oral history on February 5, 2025. Thank you, John, for agreeing to do this. Let's begin with a brief summary of your life, where you grew up, where you went to law school, college, and your professional work since law school. Then we'll ask some questions about legal services.

John Levi:
I grew up here in Chicago, in the Hyde Park community. During the Fifties and Sixties that was my home. I went to the Lab School at the University of Chicago for high school. During much of that time my dad, Edward Levi, was dean of the University of Chicago Law School. Ultimately when I was at college at the University of Rochester, he became president of the University of Chicago. Then I went to Harvard Law School immediately following my graduation in 1969 from Rochester.

Now I want to say that during my law school years following my first year of law school, my dad -- back then there weren't as many first year law firm type jobs, but he didn't care -- he said, you are going to work at the Mandel Legal Aid Clinic at the University of Chicago Law School for the summer. I didn't take much persuading. I was happy to do that. My father as dean actually founded the first civil legal aid clinic at a major US law school in the Fifties. The impact of that 1970 summer has remained with me for my entire professional career.

In 1973 I joined the law firm of Sidley Austin. My mentor at the time, well he became my mentor, was Newt Minow who encouraged me to come to Sidley. Actually, it was part of the reason that I picked the firm. It was Liebman Williams Bennett Baird and Minow and before I joined the firm and merged with Sidley during 1972 year, my master of law year. The fact is that Newt combined being a private practitioner with being an involved community minded citizen and that was very important to me. And the lawyers were terrific, so I joined the firm.

Not long after I joined the firm -- and frankly two days from now will be the 50th anniversary -- my dad became the United States Attorney General. So he gave up the

presidency of the University of Chicago in February 1975. He was sworn in, and this is important, he was sworn in by Lewis Powell. Back in 1964 Lewis Powell was president of the American Bar Association. At that time I was a junior in high school and the ABA building was right next to the law building. I got to know the justice a bit, and I knew about my dad's and his views about legal services. As president of the American Bar Association Powell was a tremendous champion for federal funding of legal services. Anyway, he swore in dad, and I came back to the firm here in Chicago.

Very early in my tenure here, I was asked to be on the board of Chicago ChildCare Society which was a highly regarded Hyde Park Agency children family care agency – in fact, the oldest non-for-profit agency in Illinois. We had a juvenile court watching committee for our board. I was on that committee. I used to go fairly regularly with a group of others to see the juvenile court in action. At the same time, here in our firm way back, we had a program where one Saturday a month for I think most of the year, a group of us went to what was called the northwest side office of what was then the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago. Now it is at Legal Aid Chicago. We would take whatever came in the door helping on a pro bono basis these low income folks. I did that for the first few years of my career here with other lawyers who were in litigation with me. A few years later, I was appointed by the Chief Judge of the Cook County Circuit Court to the Citizens Committee for the Juvenile Courts, I served on that Committee for about a decade.

Cook County has the oldest dedicated juvenile court in the nation, and 1999 was its hundredth anniversary. In that year, we created the Jane Addams Juvenile Court Foundation. In recognition of this milestone and to support the work of the Court. I served actually then on the Board with Newt Minow's wonderful wife, Jo, and we tried to have some influence, and I think we made some headway. At that time, we assisted the newly renovated juvenile court in becoming more family and kid friendly.

I was also the chairman of the firm's Chicago and then national hiring committee. Along the way I met a young woman by the name of Michelle Robinson. She came to our firm in the summer of 1988 from Harvard Law School and we became friends. Then she returned as an associate and asked if she could help that year with Harvard recruiting. I said, well, we have kind of an informal rule that you can't go on campus until you've been here for a while, but you can help me with first years and we're hiring first years this year. Well, so I gave her a bunch of resumes. She said there is a candidate coming in tomorrow that I can't

see who I think is going to be terrific. Would you please see him? That was Barack Obama. Well, we made him an offer. He came, and we asked her to be his summer advisor.

When he ran for public office, we were always supportive – from state representative to US Senator, and when he decided to run for President, we were as supportive as we could be. When he was elected I could have moved to DC but I didn't want to leave Chicago at that time for a bunch of reasons. I said, if there's something that I can do in another way that's not honorific I could be interested. They came to me with the possibility of being on the board of and possibly chairing the Legal Services Corporation. I have to say, they also said it may require some work. I'm not sure I understood exactly how much it was going to be, but so I said, well, that really speaks to me, and I was first nominated, and confirmed and sworn-in in April of 2010..

There are other boards that I've been fortunate to serve on as well. I was the chairman of the board of our children's school from junior kindergarten to senior year of high school. It's the Francis W. Parker School. It's a distinguished school here in Chicago founded by the same people who founded Lab School. Being Chair of that Board for six years. I would say I didn't know it at the time, really helped me in my Chair role at Legal Services Corporation.

So I am really reluctant to discuss cases and things like that. Most of those cases that I've been on are a public record, and those that aren't, I'll leave it that way. I'm fortunate that I've had a long tenure here. I've been at the firm 50 years, and that doesn't happen that often.

I will tell you that when I was being considered for the chairmanship of LSC, Newt Minow and Howard Trienens (leaders of our firm) came to me and said, a little birdie is telling us something. Now Newt knew about it because his daughter, Martha, was also under consideration for the Board, and Howard knew because his granddaughter was in the office of presidential personnel. I was respecting the confidence of the process. They both said to me, you are being considered and nominated probably for one of the most important positions that a practicing professional who continues to practice can undertake on behalf of the country and the profession. They said that the firm will support me throughout and that is what the firm has done. So that was probably a longer answer than you wanted.

Alan Houseman:

Well, that was helpful and covered a couple of the questions I was going to ask you. So when you became chair of the board, what challenges did you face and how did you keep the diverse board on track and supportive of LSC and seeking increased funding for LSC?

John Levi:
Well, funding has always been a challenge, and it remains a challenge. At that time when we were coming into office, we had a GAO report that had 14 criticisms against us for how we were conducting oversight. Today, the Legal Services Corporation has 130 grantees with 900 offices all across the country. Back 15, 16 years ago when I was coming in, Frank Strickland, who was my predecessor, told me two important things on the way in the door. I had to get myself prepared for them. One was that we had this issue with the Government Accountability Office, and it was of great concern to our oversight committee, the US Senate HELP Committee who would need to confirm us. The other was that he and his board had at that time had been hearing from grantees that they were having to leave so many people out.

At that time, LSC president Helene Barnett and Frank and their board coined the phrase "justice gap". They did a kind of back of the envelope survey of the grantees to see how many folks they were leaving out. And that rough study showed around 50%. So coming in, I understand that there is a crisis.

Now the other thing, and we did this very early in our tenure, we asked 10 or so leading executive directors to come to a board meeting and tell us what they thought we should know as a new board. Basically what they told us is, you're no damn good. You don't oversee us in a good way. We never know which office of LSC's is coming to visit us and when. It's so disorganized and it's not helpful and it turns us inside out and we don't have enough resources to get our jobs done. We also are not getting any benefit from being part of a national network. Can you please start to straighten some of this out? So there were two things I promised. Senator [Tom] Harkin (D-IA), the Chair of the HELP Committee, was concerned that we were embarrassing our friends because there had been a supply room defalcation as we were coming in the door by one of our grantees and a loss of funds. These are federal taxpayer funds. Now we even get state funding and we get some contributions from private citizens and foundations. They had to have complete confidence in the program. They're entitled to have that. I knew that from my many years in working on the boards of other not-for-profits.

So I asked our new Board for support and we appointed a fiscal oversight task force immediately to take care of all 14 of those objections, but also to make sure that our grantees and our headquarters came up with the best possible way to help them in their work, but also to oversee them and have complete accountability for the money that they're spending. We had to have that and we got that. I appointed an oversight task force chaired by our Board Members but including others outside of the legal profession. A bunch of lawyers. We're not accountants, we're not inspectors general. Well, some could be. But we appointed a special task force. They came up with and completely revamped of how LSC conducts oversight. We immediately convinced the Government Accountability Office that we had satisfied all of their concerns. To this day, we have the gold standard.

The grantees were much relieved really. Not every part of the country has access to the kind of expertise that's sometimes necessary for accounting and what have you. So we did that and we needed to do that and also created a sense of confidence in our operation, both from the grantee standpoint but also from congressional. So we reported that to the Committee and I think recovered our confidence, and no longer hear that issue anywhere. In addition, we have developed a first rate Inspector General's office.

Along the way, we started to hear from some other congressional folks, both sides of the aisle, what are the law firms and business doing to help? This is about access to justice. Where is everybody? Don't they know that this is a problem? So we started a pro bono task force. It resulted in our having a pro bono innovation grant fund, which celebrated, its 10th anniversary a year ago. When I went to that 10th anniversary meeting most of our grantees were in the room. I said, before we had our task force and began this innovation fund, how many of you had a full-time coordinator helping you manage pro bono work with law firms and businesses in your community? I think maybe six or seven hands went up largely from urban programs. I said, well, how many of you have them today? Almost every hand in the room went up. So it is important for a couple of reasons to have the private bar engaged in providing these services and supporting our grantees. They need to know what's going on out there in their communities that we can't possibly know as an 11 person board. As wonderful as our grantees are, hey, it's a big legal community in many places. Or it's a small legal community and they're very stretched the only game in town. We needed to help our grantees come up with the best possible ways of engaging the pro bono community.

Now we've got a whole huge development coming with AI, and I want to say the legal aid tech world is really ahead in figuring out ways to start to use it creatively. After successfully having those two task forces and involving the folks beyond our board, we then realized, look, there's a number of common issues across our grantees and we can be helpful to them. We had heard from the grantees that, we are part of a national network, but it doesn't benefit us and so we went out, and raised private funds to support the creation of task forces to help with matters from the opioid crisis to veterans to disasters to housing. This has helped all our grantees all across the country.
So a few years ago as LSC was on the doorstep of the 50th anniversary, it was like maybe 48th year, but 10 years into our service, I called back those executive directors who had initially seen us. Not everybody was still there, but a number were, and a few others we added. I asked them, how are we doing? What would you like to tell us about being part of the national network? Their whole demeanor was changed. They said, we are so proud to be part of this network. The work that you guys have done, the way you're supporting us has made such a difference and we couldn't be more grateful.

One of the other innovations that we developed almost 8 years ago was the creation of a national leaders council and an emerging leaders council. We were so fortunate that Harriet Miers and Ken Frazier agreed to co-chair the national leaders council. We've had a couple of iterations of the emerging leaders council. Ransom Wydner and Johnathan Hill are its current chairs. We have 200 folks on the LC now and they're not all lawyers. They're all across the country, and there's nothing political about it. It's all across the spectrum. We wanted to get the word out so that more people understand what's happening, how it's impacting their communities, how they can be helpful. As I say, the American justice system doesn't belong to the lawyers, it belongs to the American people. So we wanted to make sure that more folks across the country were aware of the serious crisis in handling civil legal issues for low income individuals and families.

Then along the way, a few years ago, we launched our Talk Justice podcasts. If you've had a chance to listen to some of them, I think we're about to release our hundredth, which is amazing. They are issue specific often, but sometimes they're just a discussion of current topics. They're about a half hour long, and they're so helpful to our grantees, and to the profession. We've had great feedback about them and our Leaders Council stepped up financially to support it. Then we launched the emerging leaders. The idea there was, we've got to have the generations that are coming up understand what's happening and their own stake in an orderly functioning civil justice system that is accessible to folks

irrespective of their economic means. That's been a wonderfully engaged group, and they are very tech savvy. They're on top of this and it gives me hope for the future.

Alan Houseman:
Well, let me go back to a couple of quick questions. You hired Jim Sandman as president.

John Levi:
Yes.

Alan Houseman:
Why did you do that?

John Levi:
As we came into office, Helene Barnett, the LSC President, said to me, John, I'm going to retire. I just want you to know that. I don't want you to be surprised. So she and Frank Strickland signaled to me that that was going to happen. So here you had a new board and it wasn't fully constituted either. We had Helene retiring. the LSC general counsel at that time, Vic Fortuno, had been with LSC for quite some time. He became the acting president, but we knew, and I think he did, that this was just an interim situation. We were going to conduct a national search for an outstanding LSC president. We felt we had no choice. So I asked Frank and Doug Eakeley , who was also a predecessor as LSC Chair, to serve on that Committee. On that Search Committee, we had board members, and also a couple of grantees and a search firm also helped us.. In any event, we were fortunate that a number of wonderful people applied to be considered.

Jim Sandman won the day hands down, and he hit the ground running and as you know was just a terrific president He has a great understanding of the issues and a wonderful speaker. He was willing to go all across the country, and he logged more miles than I think you could imagine. But if you know Jim, he has the highest standards and expectations. He hired excellent people as we reorganized LSC along the lines of the recommendations of our task force. Alan, I don't think he stopped running until he said to me, John, I'm exhausted and need to step down. I said, oh my gosh, Jim. It was right before Covid. So for that transition we had a very different situation in terms of the level of expertise at LSC. We still have many of the people that Jim hired serving in leadership positions, including our president today, Ron Flagg. So I think the answer is that we had a first rate search operation and Jim was the clear choice.

Alan Houseman:
Good. One of the things you've been very effective at is developing bipartisan support for legal aid in the Congress.

John Levi:
Right.

Alan Houseman:
So talk a little bit about that.

John Levi:
Well, Alan, the creation of federal LSC funding was a bipartisan initiative and one of the last acts of the Nixon Administration.

Alan Houseman:
Yeah, I went through all of that. I was a lobbyist for the legal aid group before Congress in getting the LSC Act through.

John Levi:
Along the way the Clintons had to agree to put restrictions on certain lobbying activities and what have you. Well, you can say what you want, but those in some respects, you were more likely to, I think, create political issues. I'm not a student of each and every one of those issues way back when. But I think that at this juncture, at least, and certainly with Frank and his board, we felt, look, we've seriously upgraded our operations. We've tightened up and solidified our financial oversight. We went to see our funders in Congress. We were not bashful about it, and we made sure that we saw people on both sides of the aisle. Early on in my tenure I went to see Senator [Mitch] McConnell (R-KY) and Senator [Chuck] Schumer (D-NY) and all of the leadership folks on both sides of the aisle.

If you've got a situation like this where you are funded from Congress and they're supporting the justice system, you need to keep those funders informed of what you're doing and how you're helping their communities, how you're providing basic constituent service. Now, we've reached a point in this country sadly that in 50% to 75% of the civil cases in state courts in this country right now, one or both parties are unrepresented by counsel. That's creating a huge burden to the orderly functioning of the courts. Incidentally

it's the recently retired Chief Justice of Texas Nathan Hecht who first pointed out to me what was happening in state courts, and it's grown since he actually talked to me about it.

That should not be a partisan issue, and it certainly wasn't for Chief Justice Hecht. We were finding out t, for example, that about 40% of the cases affecting families that qualify for legal assistance are housing related matters. Well, 90% of the time, if you have a trained, appropriate representative in housing court you and your family will get a favorable outcome. This is not anti-landlord because they don't love evictions anymore than the tenants. That doesn't necessarily mean you're staying in that same place, but you may be able to access community benefits. You'll be relocated to a decent place. You'll get more time, whatever. But the flip, if you don't have a trained representative of some kind, 90% of the time you are out on the street. That is an unfairness that does not wear a political stripe. So people on both sides of the aisle understand this. As a Board and with the help of our Leaders Council you have to be vigilant and willing to go out and see both sides of the aisle. So we were determined that we be nonpartisan, and we've run our meetings that way from day one.

When I saw Senator McConnell, our board member Vic Maddox, who had been Senator McConnell's counsel at the Judiciary Committee, brought me in to meet the senator early in our tenure. I said, Senator McConnell, you may not realize this, but I believe you were a young lawyer assisting Harold Tyler, who was Deputy Attorney General for my dad. He said to me, you're that Levi, oh my. He said, I will have to take you seriously. So I always say my dad's still working for me. But the fact is that I say that in a way because my father believed deeply that the administration of justice had nothing to do with politics and everything do with fundamental fairness. So here we are. As we're rounding the corner on our 50th anniversary year, the reason for the founding of the Legal Services Corporation is as compelling as it ever was, and it's making as much, if not bigger, a difference in the communities. We're doing better with state funding, we're doing better with engagement of the communities, understanding more about this.

Where we're not doing better right now is federal funding. Still, 30 years ago the federal grant was $400 million and today it's $560 million. But at least it's $560 million. Our board unanimously in the last few years, has asked Congress for approximately $2 billion, give or take. We've done two outstanding professional studies of the so-called justice gap. That benefits all our grantees because you need hard data to convince people that this is something that is in need of support. Here is the data, and here is what we know. Well, 15

years ago, to the credit of Frank and Helaine, they were getting the feedback from the grantees that we're leaving way too many people out. We've got a growing crisis. So we had to, first, in my view, have the fiscal oversight. We had to convince funders and then foundations that we were good stewards of their funds. But then we had to begin increasing funding. Jim Sandman was a great advocate for us to get out there and have two first rate studies of the justice gap and the fact that today 92% of the civil legal problems of low income Americans go with inadequate or no assistance is just not acceptable. We are working as hard as we can to try to correct that. I feel bad that our funding isn't at the level that it might be. Certainly the pandemic didn't help, but also have to say, Alan, in small town America we are often the only game in town. So anyway, I've given you long-winded answers, and I'm sorry.

Alan Houseman:
No, no, that's great. You covered a lot of what I wanted to ask. I want to just hone in on two quick questions. One, you've developed, you call it a data collection capacity. I call it a research capacity, but you've developed that at LSC which I think has really improved your request to Congress in the fact book. Why did you do that? I ran the Research Institute at the LSC. It ended. I've been fighting ever since to get it back. I was very pleased to see this research capacity, call it what you want, in operation again. So why did you do that then?

John Levi:
Well, first of all, we actually thank a number of great foundations in this country that helped support the development of those programs. Again, so this is not all federal funding that helped us with the data initiative. We were so grateful for that support. But at the same time, we did a couple of strategic plans and we realized that our grantees, as hard as they're having to work in their communities and as stretched as they are to try to represent and handle as many matters as they possibly can, don't have the bandwidth to take a deep breath and do a national look at where are we and what kinds of things, how can we be helpful to one another?

It would be great in a perfect world if they had so much extra capacity that they could do that. But you know what? We're stepping in to that arena and helping all of our grantees in ways now that they didn't have before, and we send out alerts to them that say, look, here's an important issue, for example. We've said to our inspector general and to our people also help us when you're out there across the country with cybersecurity. This is a huge issue. Our grantees in many parts of the country, they don't have the extra capacity

to deal with it. They're not expert, and they're not living in that space. So help us. You can help. So they have been, and our people are working overtime to stay up with sadly the latest scam or issue. Then we can provide that national service to our entire network and that is so important.

Again, it's one thing in urban America where there may be access even to businesses that will donate their time or whatever. But you go out into many of our states across the country, and that capacity doesn't exist. So now we're able to zoom it in to them or even visit them and provide trainings. This year we're bringing in the CFOs, but last year we brought the executive directors down to DC for training, all because we raised that private money. The airlines made it possible. This way we could help give training in a real time way to folks all across the country and then they also could meet with one another and share ideas and best practices. It's easier for them to exchange information, and they are doing it, and it's really made a difference. I believe in actually meeting people, having an opportunity to talk with them, engage with them is helpful. There's no substitute for that. I just saw a whole bunch of our grantees at our tech conference, which is really leading the way in legal tech. There were 700 people there, and there was a summit on AI to begin. Many of our executive directors were there. I often say to them, how are we doing? They say, oh my gosh, we're so grateful to you guys and all the support you're giving us , and these kinds of convenings make such a difference. I'm happy that is how they now see us.

But at the same time, I feel that sadly, we are just still leaving far too many people out. Hopefully we can continue to turn that tide and get through this period of transition. As I told our board, hey, we're going to have elections that's a given, and they're going to go this way or that way. We represent timeless values for this country, and it's our job to be the best possible advocate for equal justice under law, for the rule of law in this country, and help a new Congress or a new administration understand what is at issue. So far, that's what we're doing.

Alan Houseman:
Now, let's go back to one other thing. You got involved with the American Academy of Social Sciences.

John Levi:
Yes.

Alan Houseman:
You produced a wonderful volume and got them involved in legal aid for the poor. Why did you do that? What do you think is accomplished?

John Levi:
Okay, I'll tell you, that's a funny story. So I was elected as a member of the American Academy over a decade ago. Jonathan Fanton was then the President of the Academy. He had been provost of the University of Chicago. I knew his wife who had actually served on that Chicago Childcare board I talked about. So he was having a West Coast meeting. It happened when I was visiting my brother, who's a scientist at Berkeley. So I went to the meeting at Berkeley Law School and Jonathan said -- courtesy of David Rubenstein, I think it was – the Academy had a new exploratory fund and we're looking for projects that would be useful for the Academy given its membership to take a look at. I raised my hand. I said, well, Jonathan, how about access to justice? It's an important American value, and we need the help of the other professions too. It would be great if the academy would undertake this project. Lo and behold, they did.

The American Academy project did a number of things. There was a Daedalus issue, there were 2 other publications that came from the Academy work: The Civil Justice for All Achieving Justice. So there's a couple of things I just want to quickly highlight. One thing is the use of common language. The language of the law has become so complicated for ordinary non-lawyer citizens to understand. So how do we communicate better and how do we create communications to the individuals that we want to reach, that our grantees want to reach? It's just a good reminder, hey, try the common language. It is important. The other thing that the Academy really has been helpful with is broadening the audience beyond the legal profession. As I say, the legal system belongs to the American people. So we have expert social scientists and data folks who are not lawyers. Mark Hanson and Rebecca Sandefur at the University of Chicago and Arizona State University - respectively.

Alan Houseman:
Mark Hanson.

John Levi:
Yeah. Social scientists. They're not lawyers. They've really embraced this issue and their research and work has been so important. Becky is now one of the leaders of an initiative named Front Justice. There are never going to be enough lawyers. How can we deploy

paraprofessionals trained to help with some of the volume matters where a trained person helping an individual who, if the matter's not that complicated, doesn't need a top of the licensed lawyer. They just needed somebody to tell them what to file and how to fill it out. Incidentally, I think that's still going to be an issue with AI, but we'll see.

Alan Houseman:
Okay. You've talked a little bit about this. I want to combine two questions. What challenges do you see in LSC for the future, and how do you envision the future of legal aid for low income people? What needs to change? How can AI and technology improve legal aid? That's sort of a set of questions.

John Levi:
Look, funding is a serious issue. Part of the seriousness of that issue is generated also by the legal profession, which is the business of law. Big law. When I came out of law school, Alan, you could go to a legal aid or frankly to a law school and you would've been paid the same as if you went to a private firm. That's not true today. It's not even close. The cost of going to law school has gone way up. So I think that this is going to continue. I'm glad to see that more states are stepping up. But the fact is, this is a fundamental bedrock value. Jim Sandman used to point out to us that in the preamble of the Constitution, it says "establish justice" before "provide for the common defense".

Well, here we are about to have the 250th birthday of the country. So we need to take that seriously. I always say that I think it's good to remind ourselves, that each generation has to, in a sense, take responsibility for embracing and recreating the values on which this country was founded. I learned that from my dad. They're not won for all time.. So I think that it is important to use our positions as best we can to seek funding, but also to seek change sufficient to open up the bar rules to allow for trained representatives. They can be under lawyers or what have you. I am not going to micromanage how they best are used. But the fact is that we'll never have enough lawyers. So this is like a physician's assistant. We really need to have more of that, and I think we need to have that sooner than later.

With AI, the issue is that while AI has evolved so that it can lead you very effectively. It's really amazing how quickly it's developed. But the issue for us is, okay, the information may be here, but how do low income folks know how to access it and what site to go to? That's a problem. But I believe that you're going to see more tools to actually help folks get to the right place. It could be a QR code or information that tenants organizations or

elderly organizations or city councils or schools or libraries hand out so that people start to get trained into how to access AI sources. So you can ask, once they are using the AI, and learn how to prompt the AI most effectively they can say I have mold in my house, what do I do? So the legal aid community is excited at the possibility that this offers. But they also understand the issues of, well, how do we disseminate it and how does it get used correctly? How does the bar accept it? I think we're still a few years away from that, but it does offer some hope. But look, I think the law schools in this country still have an important role in and always will with generations that succeed ours, in making sure that people understand what's at stake here. Alan, I'm sure there'll be hiccups along the way and there'll be fits and starts. But you have to feel that in some respects, there's a chance that we can actually make in the next few years with the right support, a real dent in this issue. It would certainly be wonderful for the country if that were the case.

Alan Houseman:
Let me close with a question I ask all people, which is, you've received a number of awards locally and nationally. For example, the John Minor Wisdom Award from the ABA. Of these many awards you've received locally and nationally, what are some of the ones that mean the most to you? They maybe all mean a lot to you, but if you had to pick out a few, what would they be?

John Levi:
Well, in my hometown here, Legal Aid Chicago gave me the Champion of Justice Award. I said, I can't accept it for myself. I'll accept that on behalf of the 10,000 lawyers and paraprofessionals that go to work every day in legal services-funded programs all across this country for pay that's too little for hours that are too long. I didn't get into this for awards. I had no idea, frankly, the significance of what was going to be asked of us. But there's no question that the best reward will be someday I hope that someone will say that our LSC Board made a difference in achieving equal access to justice for all Americans, and that would be the Best award I could ever receive. So Alan, thanks for asking. I didn't get into this for awards. I got into this to help our country.

Alan Houseman:
Finally, is there anything you want to add before we end?

John Levi:

I want to say you've been a hero. You're the keeper of the flame in many respects because you have been the historian that has really paid attention to this issue and its importance, and you've kept the story going. So my question to you is, how do you see it? How do you see how we have been, and are you cautiously optimistic or where do you see things?

Alan Houseman:
Well, first I think you and Jim and the board and Ron have been absolutely fabulous at LSC at all the things you talked about -- building bipartisan support, the task forces, the reports you put out. I think that's made a huge difference. I think LSC is in a much better place today than it was 15 years ago. I'm not putting down my good friends Helene and Frank or anybody else. I'm just saying I think you've been terrific. So that gives me a lot of cautious optimism about the future. We're in a very difficult time now, and there's some people that will try to get rid of LSC.

I think we put ourselves in a position to resist that and to move forward. I hope we have. But in terms of my own views, I've always seen LSC as the essential bulwark of access to justice. There's a lot more to it than that, obviously. I usually separate low income people from non-low income people when talking about access to justice, which some people don't, I realize. But I think the legal services program is the foundation of trying to build an effective answer, an effective direction for access justice. Obviously, it can't be all people, but all the things you talked about, non-lawyers, the system, the way it works, there's got to be a lot of changes. But I think legal aid can be a leader in that if it wants to, for example, in technology, which you mentioned it has been. So I see there's an optimism there too. That's how I see it in my little world.

John Levi:
One other thing that I should have mentioned we did during our tenure and we've continued to push, is things like medical legal partnerships, collaborative efforts, training librarians. Because we know that so many people walk into the library seeking assistance, so we are trying to continue doing that.

But I just want to say, Alan, you asked me about awards, what you just said about me and our board. That's the biggest award I've ever received. Thank you.