



**Consortium for the National Equal Justice Library
Oral History Collection
Interview with**

Phyllis Holmen

Conducted by Alan Houseman on November 13, 2014

TRANSCRIBER: Nancy M. Kingsbury, RPR

Alan Houseman:

This is the interview on November 13, 2014 with Phyllis Holmen, who is currently the executive director of Georgia Legal Services. Alan Houseman is doing the interview.

Phyllis, tell us a little bit about where you grew up, where you went to college and law school. Just to give some background of your life.

Phyllis Holmen:

I was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, second generation. My grandparents emigrated from Denmark. I went to college at the University of Illinois in Champaign, and then I went to law school at the University of Illinois in Champaign. I was in college during the late '60s and law school in the early '70s, the era of huge turmoil, as you remember, although my first year of college we had a dress code, and you had to wear a skirt to Sunday dinner in the dorm, and there were curfews, all of that. My second year there was nothing. All the rules were off; everything changed. It was really a pretty remarkable period of time. And that drove my interest in going to law school.

When I graduated from college, I had no idea

what I was going to do with myself except I wanted to stay on campus, and I was working for a professor at the time in the psychology department. And one of my brothers was talking about going to law school. He was younger than me, but he wanted to do it and go into business. I didn't want to do that, but it seemed to me that going to law school might be a way that you could create change, that you might be able to make the world a better place. So I applied, got in, and it was a very interesting time to be in law school too.

My third year in law school, most of the -- many of the -- my classmates -- spent all their time in the lounge watching TV because it was the days of the Watergate hearings, and that was as much of a legal education in the law as anything else. You know, peaceful transition of power, very, very difficult time.

Alan Houseman:

And after law school, where did you start out?

Phyllis Holmen:

I was -- I wanted to do public interest law, as I said. There wasn't really -- there weren't really that many kinds of opportunities to do public interest

law. A recruiter from Georgia Legal Services came to the University of Illinois and interviewed a number of people. I later learned that they took a whole swing around the Midwest and went to Northwestern, the University of Chicago, Wisconsin, Michigan, and hired three people from Illinois. We did not consider ourselves in the ranks of Chicago and Northwestern. But anyway, I learned later that he felt that the students at the University of Illinois were the most engaging and most promising for the work that they had in mind for Georgia Legal Services, so they recruited me, and I moved to Savannah, Georgia.

I had never been to the South; I didn't know what I was getting into. I accepted the job without ever going down there, which we would never do now. And so the South was all new and unknown to me. Friends were saying, "You are doing what?" So -- but it was work I wanted to do, and, you know, it turned out to be a great place to be in, Savannah. I didn't know anything about it.

Alan Houseman:

Who was the director at the time at Georgia Legal Services?

Phyllis Holmen:

The director then was Bettye Kehrer. My managing attorney was Steve Gottlieb, who is now the executive director of Atlanta Legal Aid.

Alan Houseman:

You were at Georgia Legal Services for several years, and then you went back to --

Phyllis Holmen:

Yeah. I was in that office for three years, and we circuit rode. We covered -- there were eight lawyers in the office. We covered 17 or 18 counties. We each had two counties in addition to Chatham County, which was Savannah, which was where most of our clients came from. But we spent a lot of time on the road, and I was one of only three lawyers -- women lawyers -- in Savannah. The other -- one of the other two worked for Georgia Legal Services. And out of the counties, there really was no such thing as a woman lawyer, certainly not any from the North and certainly not any representing poor people. And that's in the book Praying for Sheetrock, to give Melissa Fay Greene a plug.

Alan Houseman:

Right. And then you went to -- back to

Chicago?

Phyllis Holmen:

Then I went back to Chicago because -- just for social reasons. And I wanted to get back to see what living in Chicago as an adult was like, to see if I would like that. And my family was still there, and -- but I went through one winter, and that was it. I didn't want to go through that anymore, and I knew where you could go and have a nicer winter.

So John Cromartie reached out to me, who was the executive director of Georgia Legal Services at that time, and asked me if I would come back to Georgia Legal Services. He had a position in an office just west of Atlanta, so I could live in Atlanta and work in that office.

So I became managing attorney in that office in Douglasville, Georgia. We served ten counties along the Alabama border -- Georgia-Alabama border. And I did that for five years and then applied for, and was accepted for, the position of specialist attorney in health and mental health advocacy. I did that for one year and then sought and obtained the job of litigation director, which I did for six years and did a lot of litigation, doing litigation all along the way really,

you know, just mundane, uncontested divorces as well as class action lawsuits.

And then in 1990 when John Cromartie decided to step down as executive director, I sought and was hired for that position, thinking I would do it for three years. That was 25 years ago. So I misjudged that one.

Alan Houseman:

Well, let's go back to your actual advocacy work at Georgia Legal Services.

Phyllis Holmen:

Uh-huh.

Alan Houseman:

What kind of -- what areas did you work in --

Phyllis Holmen:

Uh-huh.

Alan Houseman:

-- and what were some of your -- you would think were your major accomplishments?

Phyllis Holmen:

Uh-huh, uh-huh. We were pretty much generalists then. You kind of took what you got, although we did have some specialists, you know, who we could consult with when we were out in the regional

offices. And the interesting thing about those days is they would let you do everything. So I argued cases in the Georgia Supreme Court when I was two years out of law school. In fact, I argued two cases on the same day, argued one in the morning, came back in the afternoon, and they said, "You are back?"

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir." And they were all sirs at that time.

Those cases were really pretty minor cases. One challenged whether the local municipal court was a court of record and so that it would have to keep records. I lost that one, but it was really great experience.

I had an interest in psychology and health, did some health advocacy. We organized a local community organization in Savannah -- this is before we were forbidden to do organizing -- that we called the Coastal Health Action Network, and it was client-eligible people. And to be honest with you, I can't actually remember what we did that had any significance, but I remember the meetings and getting to know the clients, which was really important.

Let's see, when I went to -- I was in Chicago only a year, but I had a case there that involved a

union member who contended he was not well served by his -- not adequately represented by his union. I ended up having to argue that case in the seventh circuit, so it was another appellate case. I came to really enjoy the appellate cases better than the trial cases, the actual trial work.

But some other cases that I did, one involved a challenge to the Georgia vocational rehabilitation system where they had no due process. They would take applications, and they would sort of just decide. And we had content of a deposition, actually, where they said, "Well, this is" -- "this is a" -- what do they call it? Sort of "a gift to people if we accepted you." You know, this was an honor. This was a privilege. This is not something that you had a right to.

But we challenged that, and it was settled with them agreeing to have a hearing process for people and notice of decisions and an opportunity to have a hearing. So that was the first real due process case that I was involved in.

We had another major case involving a housing authority in one of our counties that -- the director of which treated his tenants like slaves. And the

couple of clients we represented, one of them had some children, and he would say things to her: "I don't know why you don't get that lazy daughter of yours out getting a job so that you can get out of our housing project" and things of that nature.

So we brought a class action challenging the way he behaved and put his board on notice and ultimately settled that one. Actually, HUD came into the case on our side and helped us to settle that one with him losing his job. So that was -- I think that changed the climate at that housing authority. Pretty -- they were pretty much wild lands out in those -- those rural counties.

Let me look at some of the other cases. My notes... find them. Yes, I was interested in mental health, as I mentioned, and I was involved in a number of other cases, not always lead counsel but co-counsel. One involved the opportunity for people who were committed before trial as not guilty by reason of insanity, they had no way to ever get out again unless somebody decided one day, oh, well, let's bring him back to court.

So we challenged that, and they set up hearing procedures that were timed so that people would

get actually mandated periodic review to see if they were still not guilty by reason -- or not able to stand trial.

Represented a couple of other cases involving adults with developmental disabilities who were in -- hospitalized, institutionalized without any safeguard or periodic review in those cases as well.

Georgia Legal Services did a major case in the U.S. Supreme Court involving children who were institutionalized and had no opportunity for continued review. And I wasn't -- was not involved in the trial or appeal stage with that case, but I was involved with the case after it came back. And the Court -- it was really kind of a mixed decision, but the good part of it was the Court said that the state really needed to set up some review procedure so children weren't just abandoned in institutions, so they had the opportunity for reviews every 90 days. And I handled a lot of those continuing rehabilitation reviews --

Alan Houseman:

The name of that case?

Phyllis Holmen:

The name of that case was Parham vs. J.R. in the Supreme Court. And it didn't get -- it didn't

achieve what we hoped it would achieve in terms of the rights of all children. The Court deferred to parents. It really is cited more for a parental rights decision anymore. But it really did help get children out of those mental hospitals. We did a lot of those hearings. I think that had a pretty big impact.

One of the cases that -- it wasn't really all that impactful, but it was, I think, an interesting case, involved referral from a legal services program in New York which had a client whose girlfriend had a baby. And she didn't want him to have anything to do with this baby. So in secret she handed the baby off for adoption, was adopted by a family in South Georgia -- well, the doctor-lawyer family.

So I got a call. Would I represent this father, young father, to challenge this adoption? And he had in fact filed a legitimation case in New York, and -- but he didn't know, you know, the baby was in Georgia with an adoption case pending. So we intervened in that case and represented him and ultimately took that case to the Georgia Supreme Court and established his right to have his child because he had done the proper -- taken the proper steps to legitimate the child.

And I had a lot of women friends who were horrified that I was taking this position because it took that child away from that setting that she had known since essentially her birth, and it was -- she was two or three years old by the time we -- but, you know, you represent who you represent, and I felt that he needed to -- his rights needed to be protected. So again, it was a Supreme Court case, did establish a precedent in that arena, and it was a very, very interesting case for me. So that's a lot of litigation.

There were other things too and lots of individual cases. One of the most -- the case that I remember the most, though, didn't involve any kind of litigation. It was a woman who came in because she wanted child support. And the father of her child was, you know, in some other state, and they did not really have means of doing interstate child enforcement -- child support enforcement actions then. So we talked, and I told her that I didn't think there was anything we could do because of the state of the law. And she said, "Well, thank you anyway, thank you anyway."

And I said, "But I didn't really do anything."

And she said, "You are the first one who has treated me with any respect, who has listened to me and who has just enabled me to get this off my chest, and you can't -- you don't even understand how much that means to me." So, you know, part of the really wonderful nature of this work is that it's so rewarding in so many different ways.

Alan Houseman:

You have been in Georgia Legal Services for a number of years.

Phyllis Holmen:

Right.

Alan Houseman:

Could you describe a little bit about Georgia Legal Services today and the historical perspective you want to provide to it? I mean, it's one of the major rural programs in the United States. It's got a, you know, a very high recognition. It's considered one of the better programs in the country. So tell us a little bit about Georgia Legal Services. And you can start today, or I don't --

Phyllis Holmen:

Yeah.

Alan Houseman:

It doesn't matter what order you go in here, but I think we need to know something about it.

Phyllis Holmen:

Yeah. Well, I think there were some values and some -- sort of principles established early on, one of which was the fact -- it led -- it developed from the fact that Georgia is a very big state and we had offices all over the state. When I started, we had nine offices across the state, and you just didn't see each other very much. But we did have statewide conferences each year. We had trainings for, you know, new lawyers and for older lawyers on evidence. And training was very, very highly valued.

We had, as I mentioned earlier, specialist attorneys who were available to work with any lawyers on any kind of cases. And it was important to have those specialists because young lawyers were so young. And a lot of them were from out of state, didn't go to Georgia schools, had to learn Georgia law and procedure. So there was a lot of emphasis on training, on support, on doing things with -- on a high level with good quality, good, thorough research and so forth.

And we also looked to good schools to recruit new lawyers. We recruited lawyers from all over the country now, east to west. We have recruited some of our best lawyers from local Georgia schools, who have stayed around.

We have also a deep tradition of people staying a long time. I recently -- we recently hired a new staff member in our executive team, and he was asking me and the other members of that team, you know, asked me, "How long have you been with Georgia Legal Services?"

And I said, "40 years."

And he said, "Oh, four years?"

"No. I said 40."

And he said, "Oh, my gosh."

And I said, "Thomas here has been with Georgia Legal Services for 35 years. Lisa here has been with Georgia Legal Services for 37 years." And he was astonished.

So part of the quality of the program is the longevity of the staff. But we do also look for new lawyers to hire who have that spark, who have that vision of using law as an instrument for social change. We continue to have statewide conferences, although not

always annually, because of funding.

We went through the same ups and downs that a lot of other legal services programs went to -- went through with funding, cuts, and funding increases and funding cuts and funding increases. We would often bring in a consultant to help us work through what this particular reduction would mean. I remember back in the early '80s I think we lost 25 percent of our lawyers. In the early part of this century we lost 20 percent of our lawyers over the last several years. So we really have been up and down. In the Carter administration we had 23 offices around the state. Now we have nine. So I think it's the values that we established at the beginning, the fact that we tried to create a sense of we are one program with -- that values high quality and training and highly skilled lawyers.

Alan Houseman:

So how large is your staff now, and what is it made up of in terms of attorneys and paralegals?

Phyllis Holmen:

There are now about 62, 63 lawyers. We have a couple of vacancies we are trying to fill still. We have actually been able to put a few lawyers back from

the last couple years. We have about 25 paralegals and a fair number of support staff. Of course the usual office managers, accountants, fund-raiser and so forth, so altogether I think it's about 130 people. We were up to 300 at one point, so...

Alan Houseman:

You have been very active in the Georgia bar as well. What don't you talk a little bit about the roles you played there, committees you have been on.

Phyllis Holmen:

Uh-huh, uh-huh.

Alan Houseman:

Some of the activities that you've --

Phyllis Holmen:

Uh-huh.

Alan Houseman:

-- been involved with.

Phyllis Holmen:

I started getting involved with the state bar when I was a litigation director and would go to the annual meetings of the board of governors and the state bar and board of governors' meetings. And when I was offered the job as executive director, I was told, you know, we expect you to continue to be active with the

state bar. My predecessor was a Georgia lawyer and from Georgia, and he knew a lot of people, so that was an easy thing for him to do. For me it was not so easy, not to mention the fact that I was a woman, which was pretty unusual in those days to be active in the bar.

But I began to go to all of the meetings and was encouraged by some private lawyers who were supportive of us to run for the board of governors. And so I ran for the board of governors in 1992 and with help from some friends was elected and have been elected every two years since then.

A couple of years after that I was encouraged to run for the executive committee of the bar, which is really the decision-making entity, and ran for that and was elected for that, so I have served on the executive committee probably almost 20 years as well now. And in fact, I think I may be the longest serving person on the executive committee at this point, did run for office and -- but couldn't beat the University of Georgia grad who was my opponent. But I think I serve a better purpose by being there than having actually been in a leadership position per se, which is not to say that I have generated just humongous support among

the state bar. But they know who we are, and we have a lot of friends.

It's been interesting. I've had occasion over the years for various initiatives to do some phone calling of board of governors members to talk to them about, you know, dues add-ons and things of that nature, and have called DAs in rural Georgia counties to ask them for their vote. And they will say to me things like, "Oh, we know what Georgia Legal Services does. I don't know what we would do without you," people who I wouldn't have thought would express that opinion. So there's -- we've generated support out there that I wasn't anticipating that we would do, and -- but sometimes that's just being human and talking to people face to face and getting to know them on their levels.

There's one member of the board who is considered sort of a curmudgeon, and, you know, I never really talked to him very much. But one evening we were at the bar after the meeting and chitchatting, and I learned that he is a sailor. And my husband is a sailor, and so we got to talking about sailboats and two-pronged -- what do you call the thing that goes around? Anyway, equipment on the boat. And so we are

friends now. It's been a useful relationship.

I've been on a lot of different committees, the Access to Justice Committee, the -- probably the most important one has been the Advisory Committee on Legislation where I've been able to -- a lot of the stuff they do is legislative, you know, property issues and fiduciary issues and that sort of thing. But there has been a funding for legal services which I've been able to sort of make sure people understood what that was all about, to handle cases involving domestic violence, and we have been able to keep that funding at the state level for a number of years.

So currently I'm on a committee, long-range planning committee of the state bar, and we're -- I think it's a really important committee, both for the bar but also for the profession and for legal services, because there are ways of accessing the law that are being discussed now that a lot of the members are really nervous about. You know, on-line legal services, Web site legal services. And that's the way of the future, and we are just going to have to deal with it. I mean, it's not just for our clients; it's for all the people who we -- who have a little bit too much money for us but can't afford a private lawyer.

I frequently tell my colleagues on the executive committee that 60 percent of the people in the state of Georgia couldn't afford anybody in that room -- it's probably actually higher than that -- so they need to get serious about access to justice from that standpoint. So I think it's an important place to be for that era.

Another one of the things that -- this is not exactly -- not a bar position, but I was asked by the Supreme Court to serve on the Indigent Defense Commission. The Supreme Court wanted to do something about the terrible state of indigent defense in Georgia, and this is maybe ten years ago now. So when a Supreme Court justice calls you, you say "yes" no matter what. But I really enjoyed being on that commission. It really -- it lasted a couple of years, and we ended up with a statewide, state-funded public defender system.

And I think I had some useful input into that with respect to the authority of the state-level person to be the ultimate firing decision maker so that the local public defender chiefs -- they call them chief defenders at the local level -- couldn't be pressured by local county commissioners or what have you. If

they didn't like what was being done, there would be a process that involved a person who was farther removed, which is how we handle those kinds of actions at Georgia Legal Services. So I think that was a useful -- both to empower the head person but also to provide a little political protection for the local public defenders. So...

Alan Houseman:

Well, you have also been active in the American Bar Association. Why don't you describe a little bit about it so those --

Phyllis Holmen:

Yeah, yeah. All right. I was -- I served on SCLAID for a couple of years.

Alan Houseman:

What is SCLAID?

Phyllis Holmen:

SCLAID is the Standing Commission on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants. And although I was in civil legal services, I actually got involved in the indigent defense side of that with Norm from Indiana.

Alan Houseman:

Yeah.

Phyllis Holmen:

And that was really helpful when we were working on the -- our state indigent defense program. And -- but then what grew out of that was I was asked to serve on the task force for right to counsel. And that was interesting because I was never really all that enthused about trying to advocate for the right to counsel because I really thought it would detract from the legal services programs. But I went to some of those meetings and read some of Earl Johnson's writing, and I said I'm wrong on this one. This is the right place to be. There's got to be work going on here as well. We are not doing very well in that arena in Georgia. This was -- just was a very bad Supreme Court decision, not handled by us, but involving child support collection and the right of people who are being pursued for child support to have lawyers in those cases, and it didn't come out the right way.

Alan Houseman:

The U.S. Supreme Court?

Phyllis Holmen:

No, no. Georgia Supreme Court. Georgia Supreme Court.

So that's my ABA -- well, I did help organize

a program many, many years ago with -- with -- _____ at this part -- I can't remember that. It was about individual rights. It had a -- it was an ABA meeting in Atlanta. Put Carl Sagan on the panel. I can't remember why we had Carl Sagan on the panel, right. But anyway, you could remember the name of the person I'm trying to think. African-American scholar, Harvard scholar?

Alan Houseman:

You don't mean Ogletree? Charles Ogletree?

Phyllis Holmen:

Yes, yes. Charles Ogletree was on that panel. Yeah, that was a really fun thing to put together.

Alan Houseman:

Right.

Phyllis Holmen:

Yeah, so...

Alan Houseman:

You also won a number -- I don't know if you won them. You have been honored with a number of awards.

Phyllis Holmen:

Uh-huh, uh-huh.

Alan Houseman:

I'm letting you describe a few of those to
give a --

Phyllis Holmen:

Uh-huh.

Alan Houseman:

-- little flair to --

Phyllis Holmen:

Uh-huh.

Alan Houseman:

-- why you are such an important person, so
to speak.

Phyllis Holmen:

Well, you know, when you get a lifetime
achievement award when you are 45 years old, you sort
of wonder about that. But I have been honored with
awards from the state bar General Practice and Trial
Section; from the Anti-Defamation League; the Elbert
Tuttle Award, which is a really special award given
that it's named for Elbert Tuttle; the Georgia
Association of Women Lawyers. Most recently the
American Bar Association gave an award to Georgia Legal
Services, the Hodson Award from the Government and
Public Sector Lawyers Division. And that was for --

frame it different ways, but outstanding service to the community.

And it was -- we were nominated because of how we approached the impact of the recession on our clients and how we strategically deployed resources to help people get through that experience, starting with representing tons and tons of unemployment claims for people who just needed to survive when unemployment benefits ran out. We said okay, well, now we have to do food stamp cases and Medicaid cases. So -- and many of our staff had not really kept up on food stamps and Medicaid cases because paralegals did that. We didn't have enough paralegals anymore, so they took that up.

Then we -- following that, we have more recently decided we needed to have a more affirmative antipoverty strategy involving representing children who were being disciplined or refused admission to school for a variety of reasons and the well-known fact that those are disproportionately levied against children of color.

So there again, our lawyers said, "But we haven't done these cases. We don't know how to do these cases." And Lisa Krisher, our litigation director, and I said, "Well, we can learn, and we will

help you learn." And we put on training, and we trained our staff. And the truth is most of those cases are just very fact driven, and you just have to argue the facts. We have good lawyers who will argue the facts. So we are making some head roads on those school issues, but it's -- that's going to be a big issue for a long time. So that was the Hodson Award, which was probably the best one we've received.

Alan Houseman:

Let's go back, not back in time but to the broader legal services world of which you have been a leader -- oh, I forgot. You also played roles at the National Legal Aid and Defender Association.

Phyllis Holmen:

Right.

Alan Houseman:

You have played roles in this national community.

Phyllis Holmen:

Right, right.

Alan Houseman:

So what were those roles?

Phyllis Holmen:

I was on the board of the National Legal Aid

and Defender Association for a while, and I was also on the Civil Policy Group for a while. And I think that was a very important experience because I brought the perspective of a very large program covering a very large state and with a mix of city clients, urban clients as well as rural clients. And that's still a very tough issue to figure out how to best serve rural clients spread out at long distances that take, you know, a couple hours to get to where they need to go to court. But -- so I think I brought that experience to the table. And, you know, to be honest, I can't remember specifically a lot of the work that we did there, but I enjoyed being on that.

I know I was on a program at one point when they implemented the restriction on representation of people who are accused in public housing, people who are accused of having drugs. I was on a panel, and I was on another panel that had to do with the intersection of public defenders and civil legal services, which I still think is an underutilized partnership, underdeveloped partnership these many years later.

Let's see, what else did you ask me? LADA.

Alan Houseman:

That's fine.

Phyllis Holmen:

Yeah. More recently, and perhaps more productively, I was involved with an LADA project to support community and client engagement and with a committee of people developed a handbook -- "toolkit," we called it -- of how to develop community engagement, how to identify organizations in the community of clients, how to approach them, develop relationships with them. And one of the pieces that I specifically worked on was how to use your client board members more effectively and be more responsive to client board members, which I think again is an underutilized resource by a lot of programs. So we wrote up some suggestions for how you can interact with your clients on your board and help them be better and help you be better.

Alan Houseman:

Well, that reminds me that Georgia Legal Services had a very active client council historically.

Phyllis Holmen:

Uh-huh.

Alan Houseman:

I assume it still does.

Phyllis Holmen:

Yes.

Alan Houseman:

What is your perspective on client councils and the role that they play --

Phyllis Holmen:

Uh-huh.

Alan Houseman:

-- in civil legal services?

Phyllis Holmen:

Uh-huh. And it's taken various forms over the years. Our clients council was formed five years after Georgia Legal Services was formed, so it trails its anniversaries by five years of ours. And it has changed from time to time over the years depending on who -- its staff person and the needs in the community. It was started, of course, under the regulation that allows organizations -- legal services organizations to put together client organizations to advise on methods and issues that are priority needs in the community.

Our client council over the years did a lot of training of clients, how to be effective board

members, how to be effective community representatives, how to go to city council meetings, take notes, make yourself known that you wanted to speak, how to look at community projects and have input from the client perspective.

Recently the clients council, in the last few years they have worked on several different projects. One is called the "Claiming a Street Named King Project," which grew out of a book of a similar name that looked at the conditions across the country of the streets in almost every community named Martin Luther King Street, Drive, Boulevard, Parkway. And for the most part, they are not in good condition.

And so our clients council actually did a presentation at an NLADA conference three or four years ago with a PowerPoint and slide show about what these streets look like. It was a client -- well, it was only attended by clients, although it wasn't limited. But it was a very, very interesting session because our clients council director went through these slides, talked about what they were trying to accomplish with this project in terms of bringing attention to these streets, working with city officials about development on these streets, doing charrettes about usages on the

streets.

The clients in the room, the individuals in the room, were just spellbound. And our speaker would say, "How many of you -- what do you think about the street named King in your neighborhood?" And people kind of mumbled.

And she said, "Is it a place that people like to go to?" And people kind of shook their heads. "Is it a place that people, when they hear that name, they know want to avoid that?" And people shook their head yes. And it was really so poignant in a way because, you know, it was put to them like this is not the street that Martin Luther King would have wanted to be named after him.

So they have used that frame to do some work in some of the little towns in Georgia. They -- we haven't succeeded in helping them get funding to do it any larger, but it is a concept, and it is -- it is a frame that they have used for some of the work _____ Georgia. I think it has a lot more potential than we have been able to build up.

But another -- another area they have been involved in is community economic development, including some members have developed with other

community members, not members of the clients council, home rehab projects funded by city councils or HUD, funding from HUD, community gardens.

(Coughing)

Alan Houseman:

We were talking about clients councils.

Phyllis Holmen:

Right. And most recently they have gotten engaged with the notion of trying to set up micro enterprise development projects, in particular related to community gardens to deal with the food desert concept, and so marrying the opportunity to grow food for people with the opportunity to create small businesses, or maybe not even profit-making businesses but nonprofits that can be self-sustaining in their communities. And these are in very, very rural counties where there's very little activity, developmental activity going on and, you know, probably none that would benefit our clients.

So while these are, you know, a little bit far afield from the original concept of a clients council, I think that it is our -- a good role for us and an important role for us to support that kind of initiative.

Alan Houseman:

Do you have staffing for the clients council?

Phyllis Holmen:

We have a policy of, given the clients council, 1 percent of whatever our LSC grant is. And with that, they -- this is another skill-building process. They develop a budget, they hire a director, and that director changes from time to time depending on the situation. And they supervise that person.

And again, skill building in how to run an organization. Mind you, nobody can run an organization without resources, and I think that's why a lot of the clients councils across the country have disappeared, because programs don't support them. So we continue to support this because I think it's important.

Though I might say in terms of -- this is in the category of "tell us more about Georgia Legal Services." Some of the things that I'm really proud of is our ability to respond to emerging needs. One is community economic development, which we initiated probably about ten years ago, and focusing on rural areas. There are CED projects that focus on rural -- in urban areas, lots of them across the country. I think we may have the only one or one of few that

focuses on rural areas. And those are about helping -- helping groups of clients become functioning entities, nonprofit organizations for the most part. We go through the incorporation process, the tax-exempt process, planning process for what kind of projects they want to do. And all their projects are things like youth activities after school, but they are able to raise money with the tax-exempt status.

What other kinds of activities are they doing? Community arts programs, just a variety of things that are really driven by what they want to do. It's very client-directed, so I think that's important for the clients as well as for our staff.

We now have one staff attorney who supports that work. We have had two and an active state bar pro bono project. All of that is much smaller than it used to be.

We have -- several years ago we received a very large grant from a foundation in Atlanta to develop services for people who are Hispanic, Latino. So we have hired bilingual lawyers in six of our offices now. We have two full-time paralegals who staff a Spanish language intake line in real time so people don't have to sit on the line and wait for a

translator.

We have done some good work with the administrative office of the courts developing policies for courts' consideration on how to handle litigants who don't speak English, particularly Spanish speakers, that they have to have interpreters. So we have -- we have done work with the state agencies, that they have got to have interpreters and they have got to have their materials translated into Spanish. It's not all fixed, but we have made tremendous progress.

We really ramped up our work for victims of domestic violence in the mid-'90s with the funding I mentioned earlier from the state, which is the only funding we get from the state, supported by the head of the state bar, the first woman head of the state bar of Georgia back then, who saw this as a mission that she could accomplish and a legacy that she would have. And we've had millions and millions and millions of dollars directed in that to victims of domestic violence over the last what now? 15 years or something.

More recently we have launched an initiative to represent LGBTQ clients, who in rural areas are really vulnerable. We have had clients who have been threatened with outing if they didn't sleep with a guy

and, you know, the need for them to -- there's domestic violence in those relationships as well. But to go to court and say "my girlfriend beat me up" is not an easy thing for a lesbian woman to do. So we've made ourselves lesbian -- or gay friendly, and all of our materials have that indication on them, and we have signs in our offices to that effect.

We also have a farm worker project. Shall I talk about the farm worker project?

Alan Houseman:

Yes.

Phyllis Holmen:

The farm worker project we have had for over 20 years, I'm sure, and it has been the lightning rod for Georgia Legal Services from the get-go, and to this day it's very unpopular. We have been threatened with defunding; we have brought upon threats to defund the entire national network because of cases we have brought against farm workers.

Interestingly, the one that's brought the most reaction is a case that was actually brought by the EEOC on behalf of farm workers who alleged they had been discriminated against based on race, ethnicity, national origin and citizen status. We represented

people who are citizens who wanted jobs on the farms, couldn't get them. The grower wouldn't -- would hire some of them and then fired them immediately. They won their case in front of the EEOC. And the local congressman four days later filed a bill to defund the Legal Services Corporation, which did not succeed, but that was an interesting situation.

I tried -- do you want to go into all this?

Alan Houseman:

Yes, keep --

Phyllis Holmen:

I tried for a year and a half to get a meeting with that congressman to talk about the situation, what we were trying to do. Finally with the intervention of some people down in his area, we did get a meeting with him. I took two of my board members, one of whom was a constituent and the other who was a former constituent before redistricting. And we went in and sat down. I said, "Congressman, I want to talk with you about Georgia Legal Services and what we do and, you know, talk with you about your concerns."

And he said, "Oh, I know what you do. I've got you here on my Web site. And I know you represent

tenants, and I know you do domestic violence cases. And if that was all you do, I would be 100 percent behind you. But this work that you are doing with Georgia farmers, this is the full force of the federal government coming down on poor Georgia farmers." And he went on for the entire hour in that vein, and we could hardly get a word in edgewise.

So the -- my board members who were with me said, "Well, Congressman, whenever you have an issue, please call us, and we will investigate with Miss Holmen, and we will make sure that they are on the right path on this work." So that kind of ended that conversation. We didn't really make a whole lot of progress. But, you know, it was just ironic that it was a case brought by the EEOC that really caused this reaction, so...

Alan Houseman:

Well, let's sort of maybe end. I don't know if we are quite at the end, but as a director in Georgia Legal Services, as a player at the ABA and NLADA, where do you envision civil legal aid going, from your perspective, in the future? And where would you like it to go? I mean, maybe that's a better way of putting it.

Phyllis Holmen:

Uh-huh, uh-huh. I think we need to have federally funded legal services for the foreseeable future. I don't envision any other kind of way that clients will be served. I do think that there will develop alternative ways of accessing justice, accessing court systems, although probably not for food stamp appeals and school discipline hearings. I think we are still going to have to be here for that.

I see what we do -- and this is on our Web site -- as access to justice and opportunities out of poverty. My view comes out of what we do as an antipoverty mission, but I also think that there's a lot of other frames, words to describe it, one of which most fundamentally, I think, has to do with the rule of law; that if we don't have the rule of law, we don't have a functioning democracy. And it's that fundamental and that basic.

I think we as a community, as a method of serving people, need to continue to look at ways to do it better. And I think we are developing resources to help do that, measure productivity, measure impact. I don't think we are as far as we need to be on those kinds of things, and those things will make us more

defensible and more -- ability to make a more powerful argument for our existence. I'm not sure I answered your question.

Alan Houseman:

Sure, that's --

Phyllis Holmen:

It's becoming more and more -- well, the regular -- well, a couple of things. The fund-raising is going to be always a challenge, grant writing and so forth and so on. It's -- I guess it's different from the way legal services was when I started because now we have fund-raising and a multiperson staff fund-raising efforts. We have different regulatory environments now.

I was in a meeting the other day about a retirement plan and, you know, all the regulations around retirement plans and disclosure and things like this. That didn't exist so many years ago. You are required to have a different kind of staff with different kinds of individuals: media, social media, communications people, all these things that we didn't need to have back in the olden days.

But I do think that we need to continue to look at the advocacy that we do and make sure that it's

as impactful as we can make it; that we get the most for the people who are in need as we can. I don't like to call them "poor people." They are people who are in need for one reason or another. We will always need legal services.

Alan Houseman:

Okay. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to add?

Phyllis Holmen:

I look back at 40 years, and it's hard to believe that it's been 40 years. And there are probably things I wish I could have done or would have done, but I think on the whole it's the legal career that I dreamed of. And I wish I could have -- we could have changed more. I wish we didn't have so many people in poverty, but I think it's a complex issue. But I feel very grateful to have had this as a career.

Alan Houseman:

Great. Well, thank you very much.

(End of interview)