

## Pro Bono - Organizations

# MFY: A Rewarding Pro Bono Experience

The Editor interviews Lynn Kelly, Executive Director, MFY Legal Services, Inc.; Lisa Fischel-Wolovick, Pro Bono Coordinator and Supervising Attorney of the Family Law Unit, MFY Legal Services, Inc.; Judith Lacoff, Public Benefits Coordinator, MFY; Susan M. Cohen, Litigation Skills Specialist, MFY; Rubin Englard, Housing Specialist, MFY; and Eileen F. Shapiro an appellate lawyer in private practice and Senior Lawyer Volunteer, MFY.

**Editor:** Lynn, would you like to make some opening remarks?

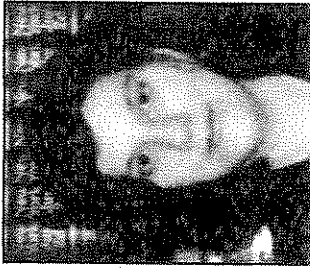
**Kelly:** MFY Legal Services, Inc. uses pro bono volunteers in several different areas including eviction prevention, family and disability cases as well as law reform, cases seeking protections for the mentally ill. Two years ago we started a Senior Lawyer Volunteer Program to use the talents of attorneys who have stepped down from the full time practice of law and want to contribute to the public good.

**Editor:** Tell us about your backgrounds.

**Cohen:** I worked as a clerk for a Civil Court judge, and then I came to MFY's Single Room Occupancy Legal Services Project, which deals with hotels, rooming houses and lodging housing on the East Side of Manhattan and everything below 14th Street. Now I also coordinate MFY's education, outreach and advocacy efforts.

**Lacoff:** I have been at MFY for 25 years. I have done housing law, family law and I am now doing public benefits law.

**Englard:** I concentrate on housing, primarily anti-eviction representation in housing court. I represent people before administrative agencies, including the New York City

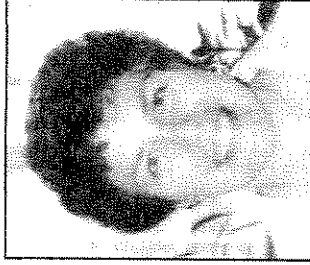


**Lisa Fischel-Wolovick**

Housing Authority and the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development.

**Fischel-Wolovick:** I have practiced family law extensively, and I have a background in domestic violence. I also wrote a Domestic Violence Curriculum for the New York City Police Department and helped to organize the first Domestic Violence Criminal Court Part in New York State while clerking for a judge. At present, I am Supervising Attorney for the Family Law Unit and the Pro Bono coordinator for MFY.

**Shapiro:** My first job was with the New York City Law Department. I then went work as an assistant attorney general, and eventually, after a stint at the EEOC, to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. For almost 19 years, I hired, trained and supervised their central legal staff. I retired from federal service in late 1999. In addition to pro bono work for MFY, I handle federal appeals, particularly under the Criminal Justice Act, although privately as well. I am also continuing my work of the past 15 years as a bar examiner for the New York State Board of Law Examiners, writing and grading the New York bar exam. As a volunteer at MFY, I have been working with Tanya



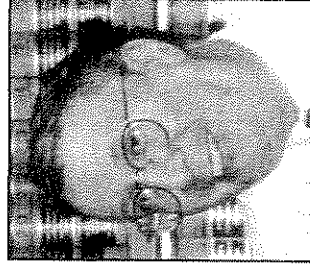
**Judith Lacoff**

Douglas in the Disability Advocacy Project.

**Editor:** Describe the pro bono projects that you are working on.

**Cohen:** Judith Lacoff, Rubin Englard and I are working on the Simpson Thacher & Bartlett Housing Court Project. The originator of the project at Simpson Thacher is Bill Russell, a devoted pro bono supporter. Eric Albert, who was in the first class of people we trained, is our main contact at the firm. Simpson Thacher wanted to engage in a project that would give its young associates both pro bono and litigation experience. The firm decided to focus that project in Housing Court, because through Housing Court you get immediate trial and negotiation experience plus perform a very important service to those you represent. They asked us if we could train teams of their people and then refer them cases. Each year we conduct a training program for 10 to 20 of their associates. We train them in teams of two and then we refer cases to them to work on in pairs.

This project is really important because statistics have shown that people who go into Housing Court without a lawyer very often get evicted. The presence of a lawyer accompanying the defendant in the court



**Rubin Englard**

almost always results in a favorable resolution and not an eviction. Having a pool of lawyers that can take those cases that we are unable to take because of our time, budget and staff restraints is a godsend. It saves people's homes, which in turn saves people's lives. It is a good experience and fun for the associates. It is very helpful and fun for us as well.

**Lacoff:** Welfare plays an important role in the Simpson Thacher & Bartlett Housing Court Project because many times, especially if the tenant is being sued in a non-payment case, it is crucial to be able to pay the back rent. Since all of our clients are poor, non-payment of rent is a frequent issue, and it is a difficult problem when rent is increasing. The portion of the training that I conduct involves giving the firm's associates some background and information on places that they can go to get funds to pay back rent, to help the tenant obtain some help in paying the back rent, and also to find a way to pay the future rent. We talk about benefits that the client may be entitled to and may not know about as well as ways to receive money for the back rent from charities and other sources.

Please turn to page 51