

Legal Services 40-year anniversary honors leadership, raises funds

August 15, 2014

Two weeks before he resigned the presidency, Richard M. Nixon signed the Legal Services Act that funds civil legal assistance for the poor.

Thursday night, Aug. 14, current and former Mississippi Legal Services attorneys and staff whose experience spans 40 years of fighting for the poor and powerless gathered in Jackson to celebrate their work, honor Legal Services leaders and staff, raise money to support legal aid, and talk about the future.

“You are the voice of so many people in this state who otherwise would not have a voice,” keynote speaker Major General Augustus L. Collins, Adjutant General of Mississippi, told more than 300 people gathered at the Jackson Convention Center.

Lindia P. Robinson, executive director of the Legal Services Office of State Initiatives, said, “The passage of the Legal Services Act of 1974 was an important and central step toward the goal of justice, yet it has been the unwavering commitment and steadfastness of tonight’s honorees that moved us from the ideal of equal justice to the reality of equal justice. Many were trailblazers who with courage and vision defined aggressive advocacy, and pushed against resistant communities to secure rights for those who had previously been denied access to our judicial system. And thankfully some were diplomats, turning opposers into our friends, justice partners, collaborators and funders.”

The Mississippi Center for Legal Services represents low income people in 43 central and south Mississippi counties in civil legal matters including family law, housing and foreclosure, consumer issues and income maintenance. Legal Services also assists military families and provides civil legal assistance to victims of disasters. In 2013, the Mississippi Center for Legal Services assisted 12,771 people and finalized 4,497 civil cases for their clients.

Jackson Mayor Tony Yarber said that he learned to appreciate the work of Legal Services several years ago when a friend in dire straits asked for help with a civil matter. The late Mayor Chokwe Lumumba pointed him to Legal Services. “I want you to know that I am grateful,” Yarber told the gathering.

Like the clients they represent, Legal Services offices struggle with slim budgets. At peak funding, 17 Legal Services offices with 48 attorneys served the south half of the state. Multiple programs were consolidated into the Mississippi Center for Legal Services. Now there are 18 attorneys in five offices – not enough to handle all of the cases. That’s an average of one Legal Services attorney for every 21,000 poor people eligible for legal assistance. The statewide Legal Services call center responds to an average of 2,500 calls each month. Nearly half of those needing and eligible for services are turned away.

Attorney Jennifer Ingram Wilkinson of Hattiesburg, co-chair of the Mississippi Center for Legal Services Fund-raising Campaign Committee, said, “If we are to live up to one of the bedrock principles of our country, that we provide justice for all, we must fully fund Legal Services.”

“All Mississippians can face the crises of unexpected job loss, natural disaster, family violence, foreclosures, medical emergencies. For some, these events are financially devastating and lead to poverty and hopelessness,” Wilkinson said.

The Congressionally funded Legal Services Corporation in Washington, D.C., provides about 70 percent of the budget of the Mississippi Center for Legal Services. Funding has declined. The 2010 fiscal year appropriation was \$3.2 million. The 2014 appropriation was \$2,598,661.

It’s been a “slow bleed,” said Hattiesburg Attorney Michael Adelman, chairman of the Board

of Directors of Mississippi Center for Legal Services.

“We have more than 200,000 people eligible for legal services in this state. We’ve got to have the underlying ability to do that,” Adelman said.

During the past three years, the Board of Directors changed its operations, sought state funding and stepped up efforts to independently raise funds to supplement Congressional appropriations. “We had to transform from a program of dependence to a program of independence,” Adelman said.

The \$75 a person gala anniversary celebration raised more than \$20,000, and earlier contributions pushed this year’s fund raising past \$60,000. The fund raising goal for this year is \$100,000.

Former Gov. Ronnie Musgrove, co-chair of the fund-raising campaign, thanked Supreme Court Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr., Presiding Justice Jess Dickinson and Rep. Percy Watson for their support of legislation which will add funding for civil legal assistance. House Bill 579, which addressed funding at several levels of the judiciary, includes a \$2.77 special assessment on some misdemeanor fines, generating money for the Civil Legal Assistance Fund. The legislation went into effect July 1.

Musgrove thanked Legal Services attorneys and staff for their hard work and dedication, telling them, “Over the past 40 years, hundreds of thousands of Mississippians, facing the greatest crisis of their lives, have turned to you.” The work is thankless, but rewarding, and the lives touched are forever changed. “We should measure our success in the lives made better thanks to the work done by each and every person in this room, and especially the honorees,” Musgrove said.

The 26 people honored are Fern W. Anderson, Jackson; Martha J. Bergmark, Washington, D.C.; Julia P. Crockett, Jackson; Fenton B. DeWeese II, Philadelphia; Maudine G. Eckford, Jackson; Jessie L. Evans, Canton; C. Joy Harkness, Meridian; Rev. Charles P. Leger, Westminster, Md.; Mary A. Marshall, McComb; John L. Maxey II, Jackson; Deborah A. McDonald, Natchez; Harrison D. McIver III, Memphis; Pauline McMorris, McComb; Solomon C. Osborne, Greenwood; Barry H. Powell, Jackson; Patricia A. Pittman, Hattiesburg; Alfred H. Rhodes Jr., Jackson; Social Security Administrative Law Judge Willie L. Rose, Jackson; Everett T. Sanders, Natchez; Constance Slaughter-Harvey, Forest; James Edwin Smith Jr., Carthage; Stanley L. Taylor Jr., Natchez; John L. Walker Jr., Jackson; Rep. Percy W. Watson, Hattiesburg; and Chancery Judge Johnny L. Williams, Hattiesburg.

The audience included attorneys, paralegals and staff who have spent their careers working in Legal Services, current and former board members, and members of the bench and bar who started out as legal aid lawyers. Hinds Chancery Judge Denise Owens and Judge James E. Graves Jr. of the Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, a former Supreme Court Justice, worked as Legal Services attorneys early in their careers. U.S. District Judge Carlton Reeves is a former Legal Services board member.

Former U.S. Congressman and Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy told the crowd, “I’m proud to say I’m a former Legal Services attorney.”

Jackson attorney Suzanne Keys, now in private law practice, said, “What is great about what we did is what it made us become. What we did shaped who we are.” Her voice choked with emotion as she said, “I am proud of who I have become.”

(A PDF copy of additional information about the honorees is available upon request.)

#####