



NEWSLEAF

A PUBLICATION OF THE NORTH CAROLINA LEGAL EDUCATION ASSISTANCE FOUNDATION

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SHOWCASING OUR SUCCESS

NC LEAF IS FIRST IN THE NATION FOR NUMBER OF ATTORNEYS ASSISTED AND DOLLARS DISBURSED

By Denise Long, J.D., Executive Director, NCLEAF

RECENTLY, NC LEAF RECEIVED national attention through the *State LRAP Tool Kit: A Resource Guide* published by the ABA's Commission on Loan Repayment and Forgiveness. Of eight state loan repayment programs in existence, NC LEAF served the highest number of attorneys this past year and distributed the largest amount of assistance. Sixty-two public interest attorneys participated in the program during the most recent funding cycle, receiving a total of \$214,369 in loan assistance. Our two closest competitors, Maryland and Minnesota, disbursed fewer dollars to only half the number of attorneys served by NC LEAF. This makes us "number one" in the nation in helping public interest attorneys stay in the careers they love.



Since 1991, NC LEAF has provided over one million dollars in loan repayment assistance to 168 public service attorneys working throughout North Carolina. Most of these attorneys tell us that they could not work in public interest positions without NC LEAF funds. As the first statewide loan repayment assistance program in the nation designed exclusively for public interest attorneys, NC LEAF has been a model for

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NOW IS THE TIME FOR A YEAR END TAX-DEDUCTIBLE CONTRIBUTION TO NC LEAF!

As you consider your end of the year giving, please keep NC LEAF in mind. Almost half of the eligible attorneys who applied for NC LEAF assistance in October were turned away because of insufficient funds. Your donation will help us increase the number of young lawyers we are able to serve. They, in turn, will be more likely to stay in public interest jobs that benefit all of North Carolina's citizens. Your support is greatly appreciated!



NC LEAF BOARD MUST MAKE TOUGH CHOICES

Roger M. Cook, J.D.
 Vice-President, NC LEAF
 Staff Attorney, East Central Community Legal Services
 Raleigh

AS A LONG TIME STAFF attorney at Legal Aid of North Carolina and a board member of NC LEAF, I have first hand knowledge that NC LEAF is critical to the careers of public sector attorneys. Each year NC LEAF is forced by lack of funding to deny applications from bright, motivated, and committed new lawyers seeking assistance to make their public service dreams a reality. Not uncommonly, applicants have themselves been directly touched by the work of public interest attorneys earlier in their lives. Virtually all of them have already devoted significant efforts to a public cause, be it tutoring in the schools, volunteering at a local

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insideLEAF

Personal Stories by NC LEAF Participants

Standing Up For Victims Of Crime



Leila Zahlan Lahbabi, J.D.

*Assistant District Attorney
26th Prosecutorial District
Charlotte*

“I TOLD HIM NOT TO HIT ME IN MY FACE,” the woman said woefully. “I always tell him to hit me *anywhere* but in my face. When he hits me in my face I have to miss work.” The woman told me this in the back of the courtroom where I would soon try her boyfriend for assaulting her. Her words have stayed with me over the four and a half years I have served as a prosecutor at the District Attorney’s Office in Charlotte, North Carolina. Her words have followed me to my current position with the Crimes Against Persons Team where I prosecute violent felonies and specialize in domestic violence offenses.

Prosecuting domestic violence cases is tough. Sometimes police officers blame the victims. Sometimes jurors blame the victims. Sometimes even victims blame the victims. My efforts to effectively prosecute domestic violence cases must, then, take place both inside and outside of the courtroom. I have trained and supervised the Assistant District Attorneys who handle our nearly 5,000 misdemeanor domestic violence cases per year. I have trained police officers on how to better investigate these complicated cases. I also educate college students, community groups, and myself on domestic violence issues. I am honored to have served as this year’s chair of our local Domestic Violence Advocacy Council. While many of these activities take place well past quitting time, I consider that they are all part of my job.



Another part of my job is keeping things in perspective. One afternoon after “coming in second” in a case, I ran into my boss, Peter Gilchrist. Sensing my frustration, he asked me what had happened. When I told him I had just lost a jury trial, he didn’t ask me why. He asked instead what situation the victim was in now and what part the criminal case had played in that. I told him that the victim had recently left her abusive husband. In fact, the trial stemmed from the very first time she had ever called the police about the violence. Even after the jury came back with a “not guilty” verdict, the victim nevertheless thanked me profusely. She seemed strengthened by the fact that she had stood up for herself and that I had stood up for her, too. The State had fought back where she, at 5 feet tall and 88 pounds, could not. She told me she was now ready to move on to a healthier, safer life for herself and her children. Peter listened and then said to me, “Well, Leila, that *is* a victory.”

Peter was absolutely right. There are many ways to measure success. I remember the woman who begged her boyfriend to hit her anywhere but her face. I wonder if I were the first person to tell her that her boyfriend should not, and could not, hit her at all. I convicted her perpetrator, but of equal importance, I gave her respect and referrals rather than judgment and blame. I cannot fix people’s lives, and, of course, that is not my job. But treating crime victims with dignity is part of my job. I went to law school to attain knowledge and skills that I could use to make the world a better place. How amazing it is to have the opportunity to fulfill that goal, in some small way, every single day that I go to work. I am glad that NC LEAF helps me stay in the job I love.

From Pastor To Public Interest Attorney



Gene Hines, J.D.

*Legal Aid of North Carolina
Asheville*

THERE ARE THREE THINGS that I know about my practice as an attorney for the Asheville office of Legal Aid of North Carolina. The first is that I am where I should be. I entered law school in 1993, at the age of 46, with the intention of practicing some form of public interest law. As a pastor of Southern Baptist churches in rural areas of South Carolina and Virginia I saw on too many occasions how difficult it was for many people in those rural areas to have full and equal access to the legal system. That is one of the primary things that sent me to law school.

Secondly, I know that I probably could not remain where I am without NC LEAF. My wife is a teacher in the Buncombe County school system, and even with our combined income the likelihood is that I could not do the work I am doing and pay my law school loan without NC LEAF.

The third thing is that I know that I am where I want to be. I spend a lot of time in court in six counties of Western North Carolina representing indigent people. I represent them primarily in domestic violence and child custody hearings. The satisfaction comes from knowing that I am playing a role in making sure that people who cannot afford a lawyer get their day in court. That is what I want to do and should be doing, and it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to do it without NC LEAF.

Protecting The Poor From Predatory Lending



Chandra Taylor, J.D.

*Financial Protection Law Center
Durham*

FINANCIAL PROTECTION LAW CENTER is a non-profit law center devoted to advocacy against predatory lending. Our law firm provides high quality legal services to mortgage loan borrowers who have encountered abusive lending practices. In law school, I spent a great deal of time interviewing for more traditional legal positions. No one position piqued my interest as did this one. Economic sustainability for North Carolina families is close to my heart. Not only does the work we do save individual homes, it keeps some families together. (Some statistics attribute the cause of most marital problems to be financial.)

Through civil litigation brought on behalf of consumers on both an individual and class basis, the problem of abusive lending practices can be abated. I am proud that my work allows consumers to be real players in our economy. Without the efforts of this agency and other institutions that protect the wealth of North Carolina residents, corporate lending entities will continue to dominate the playing field. The opportunity to work on this justice issue right out of law school has been a constant intellectual challenge, as well as a civic joy.

I am so pleased that a program like NC LEAF exists with such rational guidelines for participation. This program acknowledges the benefit of non-profit legal work and provides relief to law school graduates who wish to help clients who may not be able to pay up-front fees. NC LEAF does its part in maintaining a cadre of experienced legal professionals who are able to assist our communities in extraordinary ways. For that, I am very appreciative.



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groups in other states seeking advice on how to start and continue similar programs. I receive regular inquiries from across the country on how to approach the legislature for funding, how to set up program guidelines, or establish selection criteria for applicants. In August, NC LEAF was invited to the ABA meeting in Seattle to present information on the

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nuts and bolts of how our program operates and is funded. It was an honor to be showcased at this national event.

However, although NC LEAF may be more successful than newer initiatives in securing dollars for public interest lawyers to repay loan debt, we are still underfunded compared to the demand for our assistance. In order to bring on new attorneys each year while continuing to help our current participants, NC LEAF needs an additional \$75,000 each year. At the present time, this means that we have to turn away eligible attorneys due to lack of sufficient funds.

Rising law school debt and low salaries for public service work present enormous impediments for law school graduates interested in public service. An attorney accepting a public interest position often earns a starting salary in the high-twenties to low thirties. By contrast, a law school graduate joining one of North Carolina's larger firms can expect an annual starting salary of \$100,000. This may explain why the percentage of Tar Heel law school graduates who choose to pursue careers in public interest law has become smaller and smaller over the last fifteen years.

NC LEAF's mission is to enable North Carolina lawyers to pursue careers in public service by easing the severe financial strain of educational debt. We believe that it is of the utmost importance to society and the administration of justice that competent, dedicated lawyers serve the poor, the traditionally under-represented, and the public. NC LEAF serves attorneys and, through them, citizens across North Carolina and the justice system.

In order to be eligible, a licensed attorney must work in a law related position in North Carolina for legal services, a government agency or a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. In addition, a participant's Eligibility Determination Income, as defined by the Program Guidelines, must be within the current levels set forth in those Guidelines. Presently, these levels are: not more than \$37,000/year for an attorney in the first year of law practice; not more than \$40,000/year in the second year of law practice, and not more than \$43,000/year in subsequent years of practice. The money provided is an interest-free loan that must be repaid if the participant does not remain in public service for a specified time, but that loan is forgiven if the participant remains in public service.

There is a stereotype held by many that the typical attorney earns a large salary and has a high disposable income. Although this may be true for attorneys in larger firms, the young lawyer accepting a public interest position often makes less than a teacher while burdened with the educational debt of a doctor. NC LEAF wants to offer that lawyer a strategy to stay in a career that benefits all the citizens of this state. Hopefully, there will come a day in the near future when we do not have to turn away any public interest attorney working in North Carolina who is eligible for assistance. In order to make this dream a reality, however, the state's legal community must rise to the challenge of offering more ongoing financial support to NC LEAF. By encouraging the noble profession of public interest law, North Carolina law firms who contribute to LEAF can help assure equal access to justice for all our citizens.

NC LEAF BOARD MUST MAKE TOUGH CHOICES

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Boys Club, or serving as a law clerk without compensation during law school at a Legal Aid or District Attorneys' office. Knowing the mountain of law school debt many of them face, and understanding their sincere commitment to working as a public interest attorney, it is with palpable anguish that we on the NC LEAF board must puncture the rising balloon of their hopes and aspirations at this critical stage in their professional lives when our funding falls short.

In this society so driven by economic forces—many of them beyond the control of a single individual or even a single nation—for an attorney to turn from the pursuit of the primarily private to the public good is a noble and worthwhile endeavor. Indeed, were it not for the efforts of your local assistant district attorney, local public defender, or the legal aid attorney serving your county,

countless individuals would never obtain the redress or compensation which our legal system offers to those blessed with greater resources or those fortuitously free of the influence of crime. Every day, the dire news from strife-torn societies such as Liberia and Myanmar highlights what it means to live in a society bereft of the rule of law. Suffering on a scale unimaginable takes place in these societies as a regular occurrence. With our good fortune, America is spared the chronic violence and oppression that characterize these societies now. But such good fortune comes at a price: it is won through the efforts of countless persons striving to make America a more just, free, and equal society.

It is to maintain the freedom we have achieved as a society, and to increase it, that these young lawyers now wish to dedicate themselves. It is a privilege to be

on the board of NC LEAF and therefore be able to assist them in this noble mission. Without loan repayment assistance, however, too many of our brightest and most idealistic young attorneys must turn away from law practice in the public sector. Our joy at NC LEAF has been to feed their dreams while these attorneys are fresh and still eager for action. The financial support of private donors has meant so much to our participants in the past that we cannot adequately convey their gratitude in print alone. The value of every dollar shared to defray educational debt of a public interest attorney is returned many-fold through his or her dedicated work benefiting all of our common good.

I want to thank all of our supporters for continuing to help raise those crops. I know that we all share in their harvest.

DOES NC LEAF MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Here's what some participants and their employers say:

Words cannot express my gratitude for this program... I have been an Assistant District Attorney in the Craven County DA's Office since September of 1999... It only takes minutes to get into debt, but it takes years to get out of it... I am very pleased to know that someone out there is willing to provide a financial incentive for those of us who choose to serve the public.

Assistant District Attorney, New Bern

I attended law school with the express desire to be a Public Defender. Little did I realize that my decision would be so difficult financially... Many times, people have suggested leaving the public sector and getting jobs that pay more. My wife and I came close to making that decision and probably would have had to if not for the gracious help of NC LEAF. Your funding has allowed us to continue to help those who need help the most- the poor among us.

Assistant Public Defender, Greensboro

Our office has been trying to hire an attorney for about five months and, unfortunately, we have been unable to fill the position... applicants will not take the job without NC LEAF funds. And unfortunately, NC LEAF always has far fewer funds than needed to meet the demand... NC LEAF is absolutely essential to the retention and hiring of talented individuals in public interest law.

Legal Services Director, Wilmington

Since January, I have lost 33 lawyers, most of them forced to seek higher salaries elsewhere in order to deal with the financial strain of repaying law school debt and providing for their families. By helping young law graduates accept and remain in public service careers, NC LEAF makes a tremendous difference for the citizens of North Carolina.

District Attorney, Charlotte





North Carolina Legal Education
 Assistance Foundation
 6070-J Six Forks Rd.
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www.ncleaf.org

NC LEAF is a collaborative effort of law schools and bar organizations in North Carolina including:

- CAMPBELL UNIVERSITY
- NORMAN ADRIAN WIGGINS SCHOOL OF LAW
- DUKE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW
- N.C. CENTRAL UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW
- UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA SCHOOL OF LAW
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- N.C. BAR ASSOCIATION
- N.C. CONFERENCE OF DISTRICT ATTORNEYS
- N.C. GAY AND LESBIAN ATTORNEYS
- N.C. STATE BAR

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THIS SPONSORSHIP WILL support one NC LEAF attorney for an entire year of loan repayment assistance. The NC LEAF attorney will be listed as the “(Your Firm) Fellow” in NC LEAF publications. Sponsoring firms will be honored annually at a banquet and a press release will be sent to the local newspapers in the law firm’s home town acknowledging the contribution.

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 Website: www.ncleaf.org

Donations to NC LEAF are tax deductible. Applications for loan repayment assistance are available from the NC LEAF office and may also be downloaded from the website above. Applications are generally distributed in August and are due by early October each year.



HELP US ASSIST

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