



West Michigan Legal Aid Refuses to Die in Play, Real Life

Working for a legal aid organization is a challenging endeavor. Working for legal aid as needs rise and funding dries up is next to impossible. But the folks at Legal Aid of Western Michigan (LAWM) aren't letting their troubles get them down. They're making lemonade—literally and figuratively.

When LAWM staff members got word they were losing nearly \$400,000 in funding for 2012, they initially did the only sensible thing they could do—they downsized, and those who survived took pay cuts. Realizing this strategy wasn't a model for success, however, they knew they had to get creative, and that's exactly what they did.

LAWM Executive Director Michael Chielens said the organization has always hosted a variety of small fundraisers throughout the year, but acknowledged that "it's going to be tough" to make up for the sudden and dramatic cuts. Just last month, LAWM took it up a notch at its fourth annual house party.

Grand Rapids attorney Elizabeth "Joy" Fossel and LAWM Fund Development Director Lacy Cook dreamed up the idea of performing a whodunit-type play for the 65 or so guests at Fossel's home in Ada. LAWM staff members made up the cast of the play, entitled *Who Killed Lee K. Alayd?*

"The mystery party was a logical extension of the house party that legal aid has done annually for several years," Fossel said.

LAWM Pro Bono Program Director Paul Abrahamsen played the role of "legal aid." He was shot and stabbed as the play began but, as one might expect, refused to die.

Fossel, who wrote the script, said she and Cook hoped the play would "tickle people's interest" and felt it was a success in more ways than one.



Photos by Josh Tyrone

Paul Abrahamsen, playing Lee K. Alayd (Legal Aid), as other cast members discover Lee has been knifed in the back.

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"Fortunately, people actually got the corny jokes," Fossel explained, referring to puns such as "Who killed Lee K. Alayd?" (Who killed legal aid?) and the answer, "Fred or Al, Governor Mint" (federal government). "Certainly, we were able to raise some much-needed capital."

Chielens agreed, but recognizes the significance of the obstacles ahead. Consequently, he said the group plans to continue to focus on fundraising, including its One Billable Hour event at which attendees are asked to contribute one billable hour to LAWWM.

As great as the events have been, the organization has a long way to go if it wants to keep providing the same free, high-level service it has offered to low-income and older adults for more than 30 years. LAWWM has already closed its Big Rapids office, laid off two attorneys and one legal assistant, and implemented pay cuts for all staff members.

Despite the cuts, Chielens is optimistic LAWWM will survive, noting the group's success falls squarely on the shoulders of the legal community.

"People can help by donating money," he said. "Lawyers in particular can help by donating their time by volunteering to take a case from us." ■



Left to right: Lacy Cook (Moaner Lisa), Neil Marchand (Dan Solow), Dave Hill and John Smith (Albert and Fred Bigg), and Jim Burr (Narrator).



Left to right: The other half (and most outstanding part) of the cast—Paul (Lee), Maureen Gottlieb (Dona Hachins), Greg Tasker (Governor), Mike Chielens (Amos Burke), Lisa Boyd (UR Hachins), and Pam Hoekwater (Polly).

For more information or to make a donation of time or money, visit www.legalaidwestmich.org.
