

# Gray Matter: Lawyers Auxiliary Member Enters Fifth Decade Behind Legal Handbook Aimed at Teens

By Mike Eidelbes

**I**t's an innocuous little publication, this handbook about the size of a DVD movie case called "You and the Law." A joint effort of the State Bar of Michigan and the Michigan Lawyers Auxiliary, the booklet geared toward the state's ninth-grade teachers to use as a tool in their classrooms is short on sizzle. Other than the cover, it's currently a black-and-white publication that, save a dozen thumbnail-sized photos, consists completely of text.

It's long on substance, however, neatly summarizing for teens legal issues that relate directly to them, touching on topics ranging from drivers' licenses to drugs and alcohol to voting. First produced in 1967, "You and the Law" has been updated six times over the past 40 years, and an eighth edition is on the way. It's one of several booklets currently being updated by members of the State Bar Publications and Website Advisory Committee, and will get a fresh new look courtesy of the State Bar's graphic design staff.

One of the constants behind each reprint has been Audrey Nesbitt Gray. The Kalamazoo resident is a Michigan Lawyers Auxiliary member, and her 25 years as a teacher prompted those working on the initial handbook to ask her for help with the project.

"They asked me if I would head up the subcommittee to get this booklet together," Gray recalled. "They said, 'Because of your teaching background, you'll know what we need.'"

What was needed, she decided almost immediately, were explanations of legal issues that were long enough to provide a thorough discussion on the matter, but short enough to hold students' limited attention

spans. Leaf through the current 32-page handbook and you'll find few entries longer than a paragraph.

Attorneys on the Public Outreach Committee (formerly known as the Law-Related Education Committee), of which she is a member, updated most of the copy. The booklet's seventh edition was released in 2001, the longest span between updates in its 40-year history. The most recognizable additions in that update were forewords written by then Michigan Attorney General Jennifer Granholm and State Bar President Thomas J. Ryan.

Editing copy was arguably the easiest part in the process. Determining which topics should be added—legal issues dealing with bullying and other forms of school violence and rapidly evolving technology like the Internet have moved to the forefront during the last five years—as well as those that should be withdrawn was particularly challenging.

"If it isn't needed, it's obsolete," Gray says. "We learn from our mistakes. Every [edition] gets better."

One of Gray's primary charges was producing an aesthetically pleasing, high-quality publication—"I had to fight like a tomcat to get color [and] to get glossy so it would be attractive to kids," she remarked—while keeping printing costs in check. To that end, she managed to cut production costs by nearly half, contacting local bar associations across the state to see how much they paid for similar printing projects in a quest to find the right fit.

Another challenge has been determining to which students "You and the Law" should be directed. At first, the handbooks were distributed to students in grades 6–12, and kids were allowed to take them home. Now

they're given out just to ninth graders, and must stay at school to minimize waste. That said, an item high on Gray's to-do list is figuring out ways to get more copies of the publication into classrooms statewide.

"In the newspaper just about every day, there are articles [about] supporting the school system," she said. "That means, what can I do to help? Well, this is something that can help—something they need [and] something that is welcomed."

For example, the Kalamazoo County Bar Association has picked up the cost of distributing the handbooks to all of the area's ninth-grade students. In an effort to urge other local and special-purpose bar associations across the state to undertake similar efforts, Kalamazoo County Bar leaders are putting together a letter explaining what that organization has done to get "You and the Law" into the county's schools.

Gray, meanwhile, is using the Michigan Lawyers Auxiliary to make the state's school leaders aware about "You and the Law." The group will send letters to each of the state's intermediate school districts telling them about the booklet's availability, and encouraging them to contact the local bars for help in getting it into their classrooms.

As "You and the Law" enters its fifth decade of existence, Gray shows no signs of reining in her involvement with the project. One gets the sense she won't be satisfied until every school in the state is using the handbook as part of its ninth-grade curriculum.

"I've never enjoyed anything so much," she said, "because I've learned a lot." ■



Audrey Nesbitt Gray

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