

# The People's Law School Comes to Lansing

In 1978, with the vision of Detroit attorney Carl R. Edwards, the Michigan Trial Lawyers Association (MTLA) created the People's Law School (PLS) to help lawyers serve their local communities and to educate citizens about the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and their rights under the legal system of the United States. Twenty-five years later this mission remains unchanged. The program continues to take place throughout Michigan and has served as a model nationwide.

According to Edwards, of Edwards & Jennings, PC, who served as president of the MTLA from 1987 to 1988, the People's Law School began with the idea that the law belongs to all people of the United States. He wanted to empower them and remind them that, "this is your law." Edwards worked with MTLA leadership, mentors, and diverse groups within the Detroit community to create the program.

During a recent People's Law School session in Lansing, a crowd of more than 200 people showed up. Some had driven up to 165 miles from the Muskegon and Ludington areas in the wind and rain to attend the two-hour long program that included a combination of lectures, presentations, and question-and-answer sessions. The larger-than-expected turnout caused the organizers and sponsors, the Sinas, Dramis, Brake, Boughton, & McIntyre law firm; the Thomas M. Cooley Law School; and the MTLA, to move the class to the Cooley Law School Auditorium to accommodate everyone.

Students came to the People's Law School for many different reasons. One participant said she came because the high caliber of the lecturers was attractive to her. Another said that the program, which cost \$15, was inexpensive and provided good information. According to Catherine Groll, of Sinas, Dramis, Brake, Boughton & McIntyre, PC, who



*A session of the People's Law School.*

moderated the program, some people attend because they are considering law school and want a "test run," others want information about legal issues, and some are curious about the legal system and have a quest for learning.

The People's Law School program covers a variety of subjects. The Lansing schedule included an introduction to the court system; criminal and juvenile law; auto accidents and insurance benefits; divorce and family law; wills, estate planning and probate proceedings; real estate and landlord-tenant law; worker's compensation and social security; and medical malpractice and other causes of action.

Sitting attentively, with pens, notebooks, and binders spread in front of them, many of the participants took notes. Some just listened, but it seemed like a great majority had questions to ask.

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Hands held high, participants signaled Groll to bring them the microphone so that they could ask questions of the speakers, Eric E. Matwiejczyk, an Ingham County assistant prosecuting attorney and Keith S. Watson, an attorney in private practice in Lansing. Many asked pertinent, well-researched questions with a general focus, although some tried to ask for legal advice about specific cases, which is not permitted. Groll then redirected them, reminding them that the speakers could not give them legal advice.

People's Law School programs have been held throughout Michigan, including a recent program in Jackson. They have taken place in the Upper Peninsula, but many of them have been held in heavily populated areas, such as southeast Michigan, Grand Rapids, Lansing, Flint, Saginaw, Jackson, Battle Creek, and Kalamazoo. They are usually



*Catherine Groll, moderator of the People's Law School in Lansing.*

organized through local bar associations, educational institutions, and legal professional organizations, thus combining the MTLA's curriculum with local networks. Throughout the years, the People's Law School programs have enjoyed much success and popularity within the communities they serve, often drawing requests for future programs and attracting a diverse group of students.

"We have kids from high school, professors from Michigan State University, and every walk of life in between . . . we have senior citizens, poor college students, and well-paid professionals." Groll said. She attributed the successes of the People's Law School largely to the fact that it fills a void within the community.

According to Jesse Green, Director of Communications of the Michigan Trial Lawyers Association, "There is a huge need for solid, accessible information about our legal system. It is a complex subject that can seem intimidating to many people; but not knowing about the law can be more intimidating still," he said.

Although official records have only been kept since 1994 and cover the past 65 PLS programs, Edwards and Green estimate that 300–400 programs have taken place since the People's Law School program began.

"Overall, it would be safe to say that people attend the PLS because they realize that there is this large, important, complicated, legal universe out there that affects almost every aspect of their lives. Who wouldn't want to know more about that?" Green asked. ◆

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