

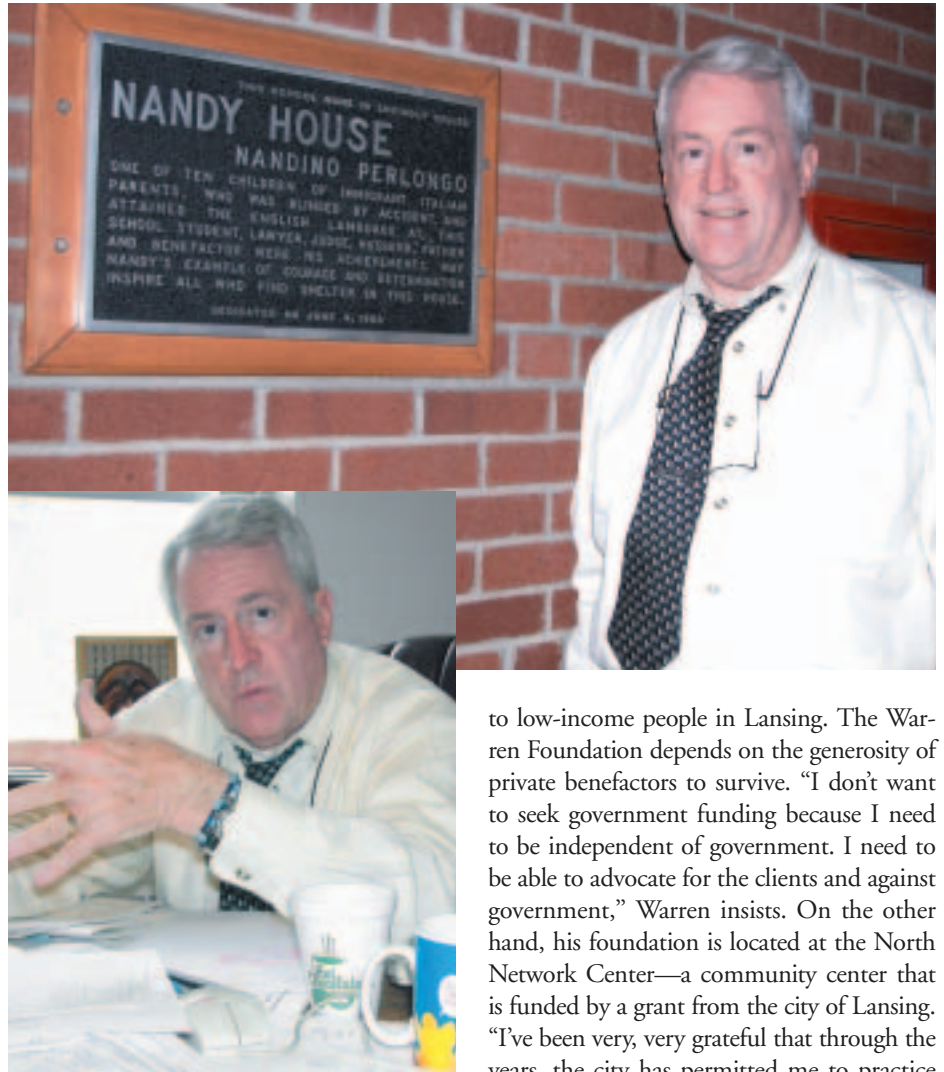
# Warren Focuses on Community Needs

**“W**hy don’t you admit it—you’re a social worker masquerading as a lawyer!” Those words from Matt, an accountant son of Lansing attorney

George V. Warren, capture the essence of his father’s community-centered law practice. George Warren’s preoccupation and concern with the needy and disenfranchised is well known in the capitol city. Veterans, the homeless, the hapless, refugees, seniors, children, area shelters, and even the police turn to him as a resource. Like a one-man band, he is able to harmonize what comes his way, producing music from a shrill cacophony. “I’m sort of like Bob Dylan who plays the harmonica, he’s got a guitar, cymbals on his knees, and they can do all sorts of things together!”

Warren describes himself as a “60s liberal, wandering lost in a modern materialistic world.” It becomes clear very quickly though that he is hardly the one who is “lost.” Overwhelmed perhaps. His phone line is jammed with messages and it is not unusual for him to get up to 100 calls in a day, from people wanting help. People such as disabled workers seeking supplemental security income. He cites the case of one such client, a woman who had a double mastectomy and who was battling a form of brain cancer but who did not have enough covered employment to be under the social security disability program. “After the hearing, when the judge announced he was going to make a favorable ruling, she started crying and embraced me. It really struck me, this is what the essence of pro bono is about.”

Warren represents clients in both state and federal courts, in civil and criminal matters, and attends numerous hearings. Currently, he has 35 pending cases before the Social Security Administration on appeal, all of which he’s taking pro bono. People also turn to him



for answers on a broad range of subjects like how to apply for food stamps, how to get tax-exempt status, where to go for free medical care, and so forth. The list is a long one. Since 1997 he has given about 1,000 hours of pro bono service to the community.

Much of this work is done through a private, tax-exempt foundation that he set up in 1999 to provide free legal advice and services

to low-income people in Lansing. The Warren Foundation depends on the generosity of private benefactors to survive. “I don’t want to seek government funding because I need to be independent of government. I need to be able to advocate for the clients and against government,” Warren insists. On the other hand, his foundation is located at the North Network Center—a community center that is funded by a grant from the city of Lansing. “I’ve been very, very grateful that through the years, the city has permitted me to practice even though I might be in court whacking away at the city for various things!”

Over 70 percent of the housing within a one-mile radius of the community center is rented and the majority of the occupants are needy single parents. Practicing in close proximity to such a neighborhood has distinct advantages. “We work with organizations and that’s the function of the network center so that a family with problems can come to one

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place and get advice instead of having to go to ten places around town. Low-income people do not have transportation. They have a lot of health problems and difficulty getting dental and health care," Warren emphasized. Many of his clientele have no discretionary income so that if anything of a legal nature befalls them—like an automobile accident or if they get a ticket or are involved with the courts in any way, they do not have anywhere to go. Only a quarter to one-third of his clients are actually able to pay and even then at a reduced rate of \$75 an hour or less. Warren does not accept any compensation from clients in Social Security Disability or Supplemental Security Income cases.

When he first set up the foundation he received about \$500 to \$1,000 in donations. Since then, the figures have climbed to \$65,000 going mostly to cover costs related to the pro bono cases, phone expenses, and the creation of a law library. Retiring lawyers and judges have donated their law books to the Warren Foundation. Used computer equipment also helps to keep costs low. Warren's personal life is also frugal. He lives with his wife and daughter in a small house within a mile of the community center. "If you're living high on the hog with big mortgage payments and big house payments, it's pretty tough to do what I'm doing, but I don't set myself up as a saint in the Mother Teresa mode." The Catholic nun who comforted the dying and abject poor in the mean streets of Calcutta is a major inspiration to him and he incorporates many of her practices in his life's work.

The concept of *noblesse oblige* is Warren's north star—to whom much is given, much is expected in return. "It's what President Kennedy was talking about in his inaugural address," Warren said. "Those who have been privileged with education, possibly with money, with worldly goods, owe a debt to the less fortunate and as a result, the first thing that law schools need to review with their faculty is whether that message is getting across."

Warren fully understands and sympathizes with the position in which many lawyers find themselves. "When I graduated from Georgetown Law School in 1964, I only owed \$500. When I graduated from my masters' program at New York University, I owed \$600. Today, these kids are coming out of law school with \$50,000 to \$90,000 of debt so they can't go to work for Legal Aid jobs at \$25,000." Warren points out that large firms have large overheads and they require associates to pull their weight. "I don't have overheads. I can't afford a secretary, I use voicemail—it's not really efficient but if I had a secretary, we would have to charge those clients that can afford to pay two to three times what they pay now."

"Many, many, people cannot afford good representation," said Pete Bosheff, a consultant, who has known Warren for 12 years and who has been his client. "He provides excellent representation at a good price. George balances the playing field. He is extremely committed to the cases and gives the clients his full attention and some don't have any money to pay him. He's a very compassionate person and it shows through. The legal business could use more people like that," Bosheff observed.

Warren relies on law school students for help but he occasionally has to do without. It would be a dream come true for him if he could get a grant large enough to set up a training program for apprentices from a variety of venues, not just the local law and undergraduate schools but nationwide. After 35 years of practicing law, including a stint in a prosecutor's office, United Auto Workers, General Motors—Legal Services, solo practice, and being an adjunct professor at Cooley Law School, he wants to pass on the benefit of his experience. At 65, he has no intention of retiring and plans to continue doing what he's doing—indefinitely. He has already expanded his free legal services to also cover a community center in the south side of Lansing.

Ellen Beal, a teacher who has known George Warren for the past twenty years, says the foundation is an opportunity for young people to intern in the law profession. "George is a clear thinking person and is very dedicated in helping people," she said. "He's elegant, honorable, extremely well prepared in court, the judges like him—a real classy guy."

And while his son may tease him about masquerading as a lawyer, Matt knows well that in fact his father is a lawyer in the highest tradition—a man devoted to practicing the law rather than to the material benefits it can bring, a man who stands up for those who are disabled, speaks for those who cannot talk and serves those who are down on their luck. ♦

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