



## The Legal Aid Society of New York City

[Joann Chang]

It is a common belief that all attorneys who make it through law school quickly abandon their dream of using their law degree to improve society for a new dream of owning a really nice car. The large roster of public interest lawyers at Legal Aid proves otherwise.

Since its origin in 1876, The Legal Aid Society of New York City has been dedicated to providing public interest legal services, generally to New York's underclasses. What initially began as one attorney hired by the German Society of New York to protect German immigrants from exploitation has now grown into the nation's oldest and largest public interest law firm. New York attorneys looking for a job that will help ensure public access to legal assistance will not find a better opportunity than with the 800-lawyer Legal Aid Society. With offices in all five boroughs and an annual caseload topping 300,000, Legal Aid will undoubtedly provide copious amounts of experience in public interest law.

Legal Aid's practice areas consist of its civil, criminal defense and juvenile divisions, with the criminal defense practice accounting for two-thirds of its caseload. Historically, the Society's civil division has been the primary basis of the organization, providing a range of services including assistance in employment law, health law, housing law, and immigration law. The attorneys in the criminal defense division serve as New York City's primary public defenders. The criminal division has recently experienced tremendous growth with the addition of 80 new attorneys this past fall, bringing the division total to 500 attorneys. Finally, the juvenile division handles over 90% of all New York City Family Court cases and is currently working with the Family Court to prioritize a child's need for stability in the court system.

Aside from providing legal assistance to the poor, Legal Aid also takes on special com-

munity projects. Among its recent undertakings is the World Trade Center project, which provides legal assistance to thousands of New Yorkers facing uncertain housing, employment or living situations due to the 9/11 disaster. Another project taken on by Legal Aid in its commitment to the community is the Campaign for Harlem. At the core of this project is the construction of a 29,000 square foot building that will alleviate the current cramped conditions of the Harlem office. In addition to the new building, the Campaign for Harlem project hopes to raise a \$22 million fund to provide continuing financial support for the office and the surrounding neighborhood.

Devoid of the usual corporate perks such as expensive luncheons and cocktail parties, the Legal Aid Society provides its attorneys basic monetary compensation and uses the rest of its funds to further its causes. Attorneys seem happy to work with non-corporate salaries and derive their satisfaction from the altruistic nature of their work. But the low salaries do not necessarily eliminate job competition. Budget restrictions for many public interest firms, including Legal Aid, mean the number of jobs is strictly limited. And in addition to academic excellence, Legal Aid looks for a proven commitment to working with the poor in its candidates. For those future attorneys with interest in public interest law, the Society also offers exceptional fellowship and internship opportunities. In fact, second year law student interns are assigned court cases under supervision after a six-week training program.

While many attorneys join The Legal Aid Society with aspirations of changing the world, most come to realize that the real emotional rewards lie in helping one individual or family at a time. Although The Legal Aid Society only offers small salaries and budget restrictions limit the number of available jobs, staff attorneys report great personal fulfillment as well as invaluable job experience.