

## 2009-A Year of Challenges, Opportunities and Successes

2010 will mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Memphis Area Legal Services, Inc. as a partner in the quest for equal access and justice for all!

Reflecting on our journey through 2009 will set the stage for our work and activities for 2010. It was a year in which the recessed economy left many of our neighbors in a world of economic hurt. It was a year in which the unemployment rate was the worst in a quarter of a century, when people not only lost their jobs, but also lost their homes. Foreclosures hit record highs in 2009 and predictions for the first half of 2010 don't paint a brighter picture in the near future for the people of Memphis and Shelby County, Tipton, Fayette and Lauderdale counties.

What did all that mean to Memphis Area Legal Services in 2009? It meant that a relatively small law firm of only 20 dedicated lawyers and 9 paralegals and housing counselors with a client eligible population of approximately 200,000 was overwhelmed with requests for help from the most vulnerable among us: the poor and the elderly. Many of those requests involved consumer and housing (and foreclosure) problems, which directly resulted from a bad economy, and domestic violence issues, for which studies have shown to increase in dire economic times.

In 2009, while testifying before a U.S. House Judiciary Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law in Washington D.C, I told our nation's leaders that MALS was forced to turn away 65 percent of the poor people seeking help because of a lack of resources in a troubled economy. I also stated that MALS could reduce that percentage if MALS had more funding to hire more staff.

MALS' annual fund-raising campaign also felt the effects of a recessed economy. The Memphis legal community once again dug deep into its pockets and pledged to contribute scarce funds to MALS during our recently ended campaign. That community will be asked to join MALS' excellent staff to work even harder this year to make sure as many people as possible in need of legal services can be provided with the legal counsel they need. As we all know, justice shouldn't be limited to those who can afford private counsel.

But all is not bleak at MALS. 2009 brought some great and memorable highlights. Fortunately, that best-of-times list is longer than the worst of times.

### In 2009:

- MALS presented to Chief Justice Janice Holder, and her colleagues on the Tennessee Supreme Court, the W. J. Michael Cody Pro Bono Attorney of the Year Award for the Court's commitment to Access to Justice;

- MALS' Linda Seely, Director of Pro Bono Projects, was elected Secretary of the Memphis Bar Association and Frank Cantrell was elected to the MBA Board;
- Saul Belz with Glankler Brown PLLC did a remarkable job under the most difficult of economic circumstances as chair of MALS' 2009 Equal Access to Justice Campaign;
- The law firm of Wyatt, Tarrant & Combs, LLP, already a major contributor to MALS, donated fees awarded to the firm in a pro bono case in the U.S. District Court;
- Along with David Cook, co-chair of the Memphis Access to Justice Committee, and other staff and board members of MALS, we served on a 13-member panel, moderated by Chief Justice Janice Holder, to highlight the growing need for low-income people to have greater access to the legal system;
- MALS was featured in an article on the front page of *The Commercial Appeal's* Sunday Viewpoint Section, entitled *Balance to Scales of Justice*, which took an in-depth look at how the financial crisis is affecting MALS and the poor people it serves;
- Liz Conway joined MALS as Director of Development, helping to give MALS a more professional structure and approach to our fund-raising efforts;
- Allen Malone formed The Gray Knights, a group of attorneys 65 years of age and older, each of whom have pledged to work with MALS and provide at least 15 hours a year to help the poor with their legal problems;
- Amy Amundsen with Rice, Amundsen & Caperton, PLLC, agreed to chair MALS' 2010 Equal Access to Justice Campaign.
- Criminal Court Judge John Fowlkes will head MALS' 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee as MALS in 2010 celebrates its 40<sup>th</sup> year as an invaluable community resource and institution. We want this to be a community wide celebration.
- Through the combined efforts of the MALS staff and the private bar, MALS completed well over 4000 cases in 2009, mostly for clients who would not otherwise have had access to our legal system;
- MALS was very fortunate to have a large group of dedicated pro bono attorneys and other volunteers who were willing to give their time in a variety of ways to supplement the work of our small but dedicated staff; new pro bono programs were added to expand the opportunity for volunteers to participate including

*The Bankruptcy Alternatives and Pro Bono Project, the MBA Business Section/  
Corporate Counsel Pro Bono Initiative (CCPBI), and the Low Income Taxpayer  
Clinic (LITC):*

MALS bade farewell to the University of Memphis Law School Clinic from within its walls. Now in the new Law School a few blocks away, MALS and the Law School will continue their twenty-year partnership in which MALS will refer cases in which third year law students, under the supervision of clinical faculty, will provide legal assistance to eligible clients.

In 2010, we look forward to working with our local bar associations, members of our profession and the larger community to ensure that access to justice is more of a reality in 2010. Thanks you for your continuing support!!!