

Service at Heart of Practice For Morris

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NICKY ROBERTSHAW HITCHING | Special to The Daily News

Ordinarily, Martin, Tate, Morrow & Marston PC attorney [Paul Morris](#) would have stepped down in 2010 as president of [Memphis Area Legal Services Inc.](#), but he felt compelled to stay for MALS' 40th anniversary – and the opportunity it presents to promote the cause.

“It’s not just a celebration,” he said. “It’s an opportunity to remind the community about the need for justice under the law.”

In addition to organizing a celebration this fall, Morris hopes to raise money for more staff attorneys. Because MALS has a limited staff, it has to turn away two out of three eligible people who ask for help.

Morris, who grew up in Memphis and whose family operates Jack Morris Auto Glass, is passionate about legal services to the poor.

“Our legal system is based on the premise that people will all be treated equally under the law,” he said. “That’s a promise that’s not being kept for those in poverty, who can’t afford a lawyer.”

When Congress passed the [Legal Services Corporation](#) Act in 1974, its goal was one attorney for every 5,000 poor people. Today, there’s one lawyer for every 12,000, Morris said.

The Memphis group predates this law. It started in 1968, when 30 local lawyers, led by [Michael Cody](#), formed the Neighborhood Legal Service Project. It became Memphis and Shelby County Legal Services in 1970, receiving federal funding.

In accordance with the law, MALS provides civil legal services only. It does not do criminal law, class-action suits or any work that generates fees. Typical cases involve fighting landlords who violate the law with unsafe living conditions or helping victims of predatory lending.

Morris is active in other community service. A fan of Downtown, he served as a member and as chairman of the Center City Commission board, and is a contender for the CCC executive director’s job. Morris was on Memphis Mayor A C Wharton Jr.’s transition team, and clerked for federal judge Julia S. Gibbons.

At [Martin Tate](#), Morris practices general corporate law, representing companies that are too small to have their own general counsel. His specialty is intellectual property.

“It might start with an intellectual property suit, but then I become their lawyer,” he said.

Morris, who in 2008 married [Burch, Porter & Johnson PLLC](#) attorney [Mary Hale Morris](#), became a



Morris Photo: Lance Murphey

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father last year with the birth of Courtland [James Morris](#). Since then, Paul Morris has cleared his calendar somewhat to have more family time.

A graduate of Vanderbilt University for his undergraduate and law school degrees, Morris first did pro bono work in 2002, helping a restaurateur whose business was decimated by 9/11.

“I was hooked,” Morris recalls. “There is no better feeling than working to help someone who, but for you, wouldn’t have anyone to help them.”

With some 25 percent of its population living in poverty, Memphis has a great need for free legal services, especially during today’s economic downturn.

“We have 16 lawyers for that whole group plus some pro bono lawyers,” Morris said. “We have done everything we can to squeeze productivity from our staff. So now, the only way to do more is to increase funding so we can hire more lawyers.”

With those resources, MALS completed 4,000 cases last year.

“That means that 4,000 people and their families were positively impacted by Memphis Area Legal Services,” Morris said. “And there could be more if we increased our resources.”