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40 Years of Relentless Advocacy Leaves Senior Paralegal, Loretta Callahan, with a Sunny Disposition



Recently, one of our senior paralegals has received quite the media spotlight ([see Democrat & Chronicle article here](#)). Thus, we wanted to spend this blog post commemorating and thanking Loretta Callahan of the Rochester office of LawNY for her tireless work within our organization and in the Greater Rochester Area community. The best way we knew how to do this was to interview Loretta, so that we wouldn't be the only ones to know her cheerful disposition, witty perspectives, and her secrets as to how she has managed to remain so contagiously in love with the work that she does.

Loretta has been working with our office since 1978, almost 40 years. Loretta joined LawNY, at the time Monroe County Legal Assistance Center (MCLAC), when our office was 10 years old and just starting out. At the time, funding for civil legal aid was scarce, but the need for services was very apparent. When Loretta first started, our office had less than 7 full time employees that closed upwards of 2,000 cases on their own in one year's time. Loretta was a part of this crew, and reports that she was a University Year in Action volunteer for two and a half years before she became a full time staff member.

Today, with an office of over 40 staff members, Loretta has managed to work on over 3,000 cases ranging from unemployment cases to enrolling clients in medicaid so that they can be enrolled in medical long term care as they age. She once tried to retire in 2002, but ended up "un-retiring" in 2004 to work for [Prisoners Legal Services of New York](#) and then back to work with us in 2006, reporting that she "just couldn't stay away from helping people". Loretta has always been a fearless advocate for our clients. Loretta truly believes in a civil justice system that is accessible to all. We are incredibly lucky to have her in our midst.

Question: What is one of your favorite memories working here at LawNY?

Answer: My favorite memory happened in August of 1989. We received a case where a little girl was a quadriplegic diagnosed with cerebral palsy and needed immediate surgery. Her parents were both disabled and had trouble giving her all of the care that she needed. They ended up relying upon the care of neighbors, the police department, and the fire department for all of the care they could not give her. Her doctor ordered that after her surgery, she would need 24 hours a day care, 7 days a week. After much advocacy, MCLAC was able to get care for our client 8 hours a day, 5 days a week funded through the Department of Social Services. Eventually, her case became a statewide class action case that resulted in the Departments of Social Services across the state being required to follow doctor's orders in the amount of care needed and to provide care equally throughout the state, even in rural areas. This was revolutionary, for so many families were struggling to take care of their family members on their own.

Question: How many clients do you think you've had in your lifetime?

Answer: That is a hard question. I would say around 1,200.

Question: What are your favorite types of cases to take, and why?

Answer: I like cases where I feel like it really makes a difference in a client's life, no matter the type of case.

Question: How has office culture changed since you first arrived? How is it the same?

Answer: The culture has changed somewhat but it is the same in that people who work here are dedicated to the idea that everyone deserves to be heard. There is no justice if only rich people who can afford to hire private attorneys and are able to contest decisions that impact their income, housing, and the services that they receive.

Question: What has it been like to be here throughout the growth we have experienced as an organization?

Answer: It has been wonderful to see our office grow when so many other things in the world seem to be going wrong. I credit our managing attorneys for their incredible efforts to network and fundraise.

Question: Do you think perceptions of legal aid have changed at all since you started working here?

Answer: Perceptions of legal aid have changed, yes. I think clients now know that we are 'real' and accessible lawyers because of our reputation in the community that has been growing for 50 years. We also have incredible relationships with other organizations, the Department of Human Services, and the private bar that make us well respected.

Question: What is your favorite part about working at LawNY?

Answer: The people. Coworkers, clients, people at the Department of Human Services, and throughout the community. I am always meeting new and interesting people and learning something new. I would do this job for free.

Watch our video below to hear first hand from Loretta and her clients:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLX4OGhceJE>

If you see Loretta, be sure to wish her a happy 81st birthday on August 10th of this year, and almost 40th year working with us here at LawNY!

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