
CLIENT SNAPSHOTS:

My Summer at Pine Tree Legal Assistance

BY SUZANNE F. SAUNDERS '01

Imagine that you live in the poorest part of your state. It is rich in rural amenities; clean water and fresh air. It's a place where you can actually see an endangered species in its natural habitat. You can't get out much however, because you are disabled. You depend on a monthly social security check to make ends meet but your rent is more than the monthly check. So, you live on credit cards. Your daily life consists of harassing phone calls from creditors, threatening your children if you do not pay your debt in full. This is not all you have to worry about. Your benefits may be reduced or terminated and you can't even get a security deposit back from another creditor because they know you are poor and illiterate.

What would your life be like if you were the young mother of four girls and your husband beat you in front of them? This isn't the first incident of violence, mind you. You are uneducated and haven't ever really worked (because your husband wouldn't let you) but you finally leave him and live in a shelter.

Perhaps you live in a trailer and rent the land it is on. You get behind in rent because you are diagnosed with a brain tumor. Not only is your life in the balance but your home is threatened by an eviction proceeding. While you are in surgery, your landlord kicks in your door, urinates on your floor and steals everything you own. Already feeling vulnerable, you are afraid your landlord will come after you.

Unfortunately, the above scenarios are not fictional. They are snapshots into the lives of some of the clients I served this summer while interning at Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc. in Down East, Maine. I have been visiting this place all of my life and know how disadvantaged many of the people who live there are. I feel Down East, Maine is the most beautiful place on earth with its jagged coastline and the salmon colored sunsets. I get so much joy living there that I want the residents who live there to feel good too. By virtue of its natural beauty, I feel compelled to give back to the Down East community by helping the poor with their legal problems.

How would you feel if a young mother thanked you for helping her get custody of her son back from relatives by merely drafting a Revocable Power of Attorney? It's a good feeling to know that you made a difference in a person's life

or in a community at large. Pine Tree's presence was felt by many this summer and made the difference between justice and injustice for many citizens who would not have had legal representation without Pine Tree's services. My client, who survived brain surgery, won a Protection from Harassment case against her landlord and was awarded monetary damages. Another client was refunded her \$400.00 security deposit and her landlord's unlawful collection tactics were reported to a state agency. On behalf of a battered wife, I sought and obtained a Protection from Abuse Order and assisted her in obtaining an uncontested divorce. My clients felt vindicated, empowered and hopeful as a result of the legal advice and representation I provided them with Pine Tree Legal Assistance.

My legal education was enriched immeasurably by my summer at Pine Tree Legal Assistance. Without the Public Interest Coalition (PIC) Fellowship I received from Franklin Pierce Law Center, I would not have been financially able to serve these needy clients. The availability of FPLC's PIC fellowships allows law students to serve under represented people, inspiring in these clients, faith and confidence in our justice system.

Saunders now works full-time at Pine Tree Legal Assistance in Machias, ME. She is practicing law in the county where her family has practiced law for the past 200 years, most recently her grandfather, Don H. Saunders. Her great grandfather, Hubert Elijah Saunders, sat as a judge in the Machias Municipal Court. She was the recipient of the Lexis Public Interest Coalition Fellowship for the summer of 2000.

Lexis has again funded a full student fellowship for the summer of 2001. This year's recipient is Rosemary Wiant, FPLC '03, who will work for the New Hampshire Disabilities Rights Center. Law firms, individuals or businesses interested in sponsoring future PIC fellowships may contact Brigitte Siff Holmes, director of Community Lawyering, Franklin Pierce Law Center.