

Gray Knights — attorneys over 65 — will help poor fight legal dragons

By Tom Bailey Jr.

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When lawyers turn 65, they are no longer required to take the 15 hours of continuing legal education courses annually to keep their licenses.

That consideration for elderly attorneys gave lawyer Allen Malone an idea for providing legal help to residents who can't afford it: Form a group of lawyers 65 and older who pledge to volunteer at least 15 hours a year to help the poor with their legal problems.

The Gray Knights will meet for the first time at 5 p.m. today at a reception at Malone's law office, Burch Porter & Johnson.

"We've had 26 people sign up for what I'm calling the charter members of the Gray Knights," Malone said. (Today is the deadline for joining in time to be a charter member. Interested attorneys should call Malone at 524-5157.)

The Memphis Bar Association includes about 200 members who are 65 or older.

The 68-year-old Malone huddled with Memphis Area Legal Services to organize the Gray Knights.

Initially, there was an effort to have older lawyers mentor young lawyers in pro bono work. But that didn't get traction.

"Young attorneys are pretty active doing their own thing" in volunteering for the poor, said Linda Seely, director of pro bono projects for Memphis Area Legal Services. "Then we asked, what can we do for the senior lawyers. ... A lot of these older attorneys have been active and involved with (Legal Services), but we never really carved anything out for them."

That's when Malone offered his idea for the Gray Knights.

"It occurred to me," Malone said, "why would the burden, the need, fall on the younger lawyers only when older lawyers have time and experience available to help Memphis Area Legal Services out?"

Seely not only thought it was "really cool idea," she practically screamed, "Yes, go, go! We're here for you!"

The need for volunteer lawyers is tremendous. Seely estimates 175,000 to 200,000 residents in Shelby, Fayette, Tipton and Lauderdale counties are eligible for help, and Legal Services has only 20 lawyers.

In contrast, about 4,000 lawyers are available for the other 800,000 residents who can better afford legal help.

The monthly legal clinics held at the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library now draw more than 100 people.

"We're just slammed, quite frankly," Seely said.

Just Monday she received a call from the sister of a woman Legal Services was unable to help. The woman said her sister had just died.

"This lady called and said her sister had lost her job and couldn't afford to get legal assistance, and that the stress of everything just killed her," Seely said.

Deciding which applicants get legal help and which don't is "very, very, very hard," she said.

One Gray Knight charter member will be Rowlett Scott, a 73-year-old who has practiced law for 48 years.

He started providing pro bono work back in the 1960s, even before there was a Legal Services.

"All these people are needy," Scott said. "Sometimes their problems can't be solved, but if they can, we solve them."

-- Tom Bailey Jr.: 529-2388

Gray Knights

What: A group of attorneys 65 or older who commit to volunteer at least 15 hours a year of legal service to the poor

Charter meeting: A reception today at 5 p.m.

Where: Burch Porter & Johnson office, 130 N. Court

Signing up: Attorneys can join any time, but today is the deadline to be a charter member.

Details: Call Allen Malone at 524-5157

