Seely Sees Career at Memphis Area Legal Services as ‘Mission Work’

By RICHARD J. ALLEY

October was National Pro Bono Month in the legal profession, a time when attorneys are urged to use their knowledge for the greater good and help those in need.

The Tennessee Supreme Court has written that “a lawyer should aspire to render at least 50 hours of pro bono publico legal services per year.”

Though this is more of a suggestion than a mandate, many attorneys do want to help, and that’s where Linda Warren Seely, director of private attorney involvement for Memphis Area Legal Services Inc., comes in.

MALS is the principal provider of civil legal assistance to low-income individuals and the elderly in the area.

Seely was born in Michigan and grew up in places such as Texas, Louisiana, Chicago and New Jersey as her father climbed a corporate ladder with Warner-Lambert pharmaceutical company.

Knowing he wanted to end up back in the South, the family made its last move to Memphis, where Seely entered the University of Memphis to study education. But she soon decided to change directions and found herself, instead, preparing for law school.

“I chose the law because it seems to fit with my interest in helping people and in politics and history,” Seely said.

She would go on to major in political science and minor in business, and earn her law degree from the University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law in 1981.

Despite not becoming a teacher, she could never shake the desire to help others and that led her during law school to a clerkship for MALS, which was expanding at the time under the direction of A C Wharton Jr.

Seely had previously interned under state legislator Pam Gaia who championed issues involving the elderly, and Seely’s interests with MALS were directed toward elder law and lawsuits against nursing homes and unlicensed care homes.
“It was really a great opportunity for a law student to see the law in action in a real way,” she said.

After law school, she was tapped to develop an elder law pro bono program for MALS.

“When you’re right out of law school, you’re kind of brash and you think you can do everything,” Seely said. “I didn’t know I couldn’t do what I was doing, so I just started doing it and it was really quite heady and pretty successful.”

Eventually, funding would be cut for the program and Seely went into private practice to work in family and elder law areas. In 1989, she was invited back to MALS to run the senior citizens unit, which she did until 1996 before moving to Jackson, Tenn., to head up the pro bono program there.

She returned to Memphis in 2004 to find that the pro bono participation rate of the Memphis Bar was around 4.5 percent. “It was abysmal,” she said. “We were way behind what the other programs across the state were doing.”

MALS began offering attorneys different levels of volunteering and volunteer opportunities such as clinics where they can go and volunteer for a set period of time instead of taking on an extended service case.

“What you find is, once attorneys start volunteering at the clinics, then they’re more and more likely to step up to the plate when you need an extended service case done,” Seely said. Seely found her work in private practice to be a strong foundation in the work she’s doing with MALS and that it is important for anyone who is going to work in the pro bono field to have some experience in knowing what the private bar is doing and how it operates.

Her husband, Carl Seely, is in private practice as a founding partner of Divorce Inc., and, she said, “is my best sounding board” with the private bar and in recruiting private attorneys.

Seely is the mother of a son and daughter, and the vice president of the Memphis Bar Association, ascending to president this December. Since her return to MALS, she has seen pro bono work among the Memphis Bar climb to a 10 percent participation rate.

“What I do now is by far the most rewarding thing I have ever done in my life,” Seely said. “I’m a Christian and to me, this is like mission work and I feel like I can really make a difference for so many people in a way that I was not able to make in private practice.”