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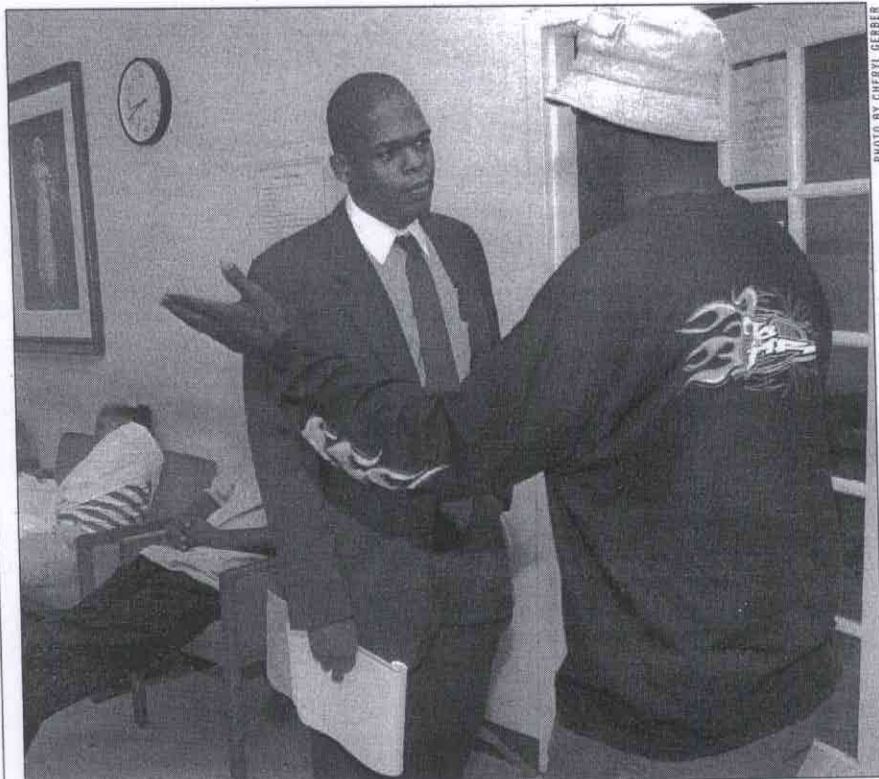


PHOTO BY CHERYL GERBER

Lawyer Maurice Ruffin talks to Landry Anazo, who sought legal counsel through the Homeless Experience Legal Protection program because said he was illegally detained in the United States from West Africa.

Program offering free HELP for homeless seeking a lawyer

By Richard A. Webster
Staff Writer

IN A BACK room inside the Harry Tomson Center at Immaculate Conception Church on Baronne Street, five lawyers from some of the city's top firms huddle with their client.

The client explains his case and the high-priced circle of attorneys pledge to do everything in their power to help him.

He thanks them and walks back into the main room of the Tomson Center, where 15 more homeless men and women await their turn.

This unusual scene is part of the Homeless Experience Legal Protection program, the brainchild of U.S. District Judge Jay Zainey. HELP offers free legal assistance to the homeless at local shelters every Monday and Wednesday. Normally, the hourly legal fees would range between \$125 and \$400, depending on the experi-

ence of the attorney.

For more than a year, Zainey and several fellow judges served the homeless meals at local shelters. It was an honorable start, Zainey said, but he felt he could do more.

There are more than 20 law firms, including more than 300 attorneys and notary volunteers, now involved with the HELP program.

In addition to legal assistance, the HELP lawyers make the homeless notarized copies of their IDs. If they lose their IDs, which Don Thompson, director of the Tomson Center, said is common, a new one can be obtained using the notarized copy.

An ID is the lifeblood of the homeless, said attorney Duke Williams with St. Martin and Williams. Without an ID the homeless can not enter a shelter or be treated at a hospital in non-emergency situations. Without an ID, police arrests are more likely.

Since this ID program started in July, 275 certified copies have been made, 10 percent just to replace lost IDs.

Before participating in the HELP program, attorney Val Exnicios with Liska Exnicios and Nungesser said he viewed the homeless as much of society does — a group of lazy, good-for-nothing individuals who lost their homes because of their refusal to hold a job. After working with them for six months, he said just the opposite is true.

"Most of the time you encounter individuals and say to yourself, 'There but for the grace of God go I.' So many people live on the edge so far as living from paycheck to paycheck. If for some rea-

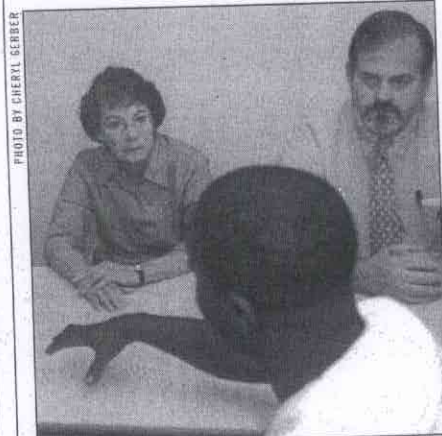


PHOTO BY CHERYL GERBER

HELP attorneys Corinne Morrison, left, and Duke Williams counsel Clarence Byrd, who is homeless.

son that paycheck doesn't come through, a person easily can end up on the street."

One such person who walked through their doors was a man in his early 30s. He worked two jobs, three days as a dishwasher at Piccadilly Cafeteria and two days as a construction worker. One day while at a construction site, a pipe burst and covered the man in concrete, giving him second- and third-degree burns all over his body. His workers compensation amounted to \$66 per week, not nearly enough to live on or to keep a roof over his head.

"He sat in that chair and said to me, 'Sir, I've never been homeless before in my life and I've never been more scared before in my life.' We did the best we could for him but to my knowledge he is still on the streets."

JoAnn Courcelle, an attorney with Adams and Reese, said her most memorable case involved Clayton Hines, a truck driver who lost his job after someone stole his car and amassed thousands of dollars in tickets. Unable to pay the tickets, he fell to the streets where he wallowed for more than 10 years.

Once Zainey established HELP, Courcelle resolved Hines' traffic court problems and had his license reinstated.

"JoAnn cleared everything up for him and it didn't cost him a penny. He's now off the street and back to driving a truck," Zainey said.

The homeless population is used to being ignored, Thompson said. "They incite fear in people and they know it. Women hold on to their purses tighter and people cross the street to avoid them. What this program does is give them a sense of worth."

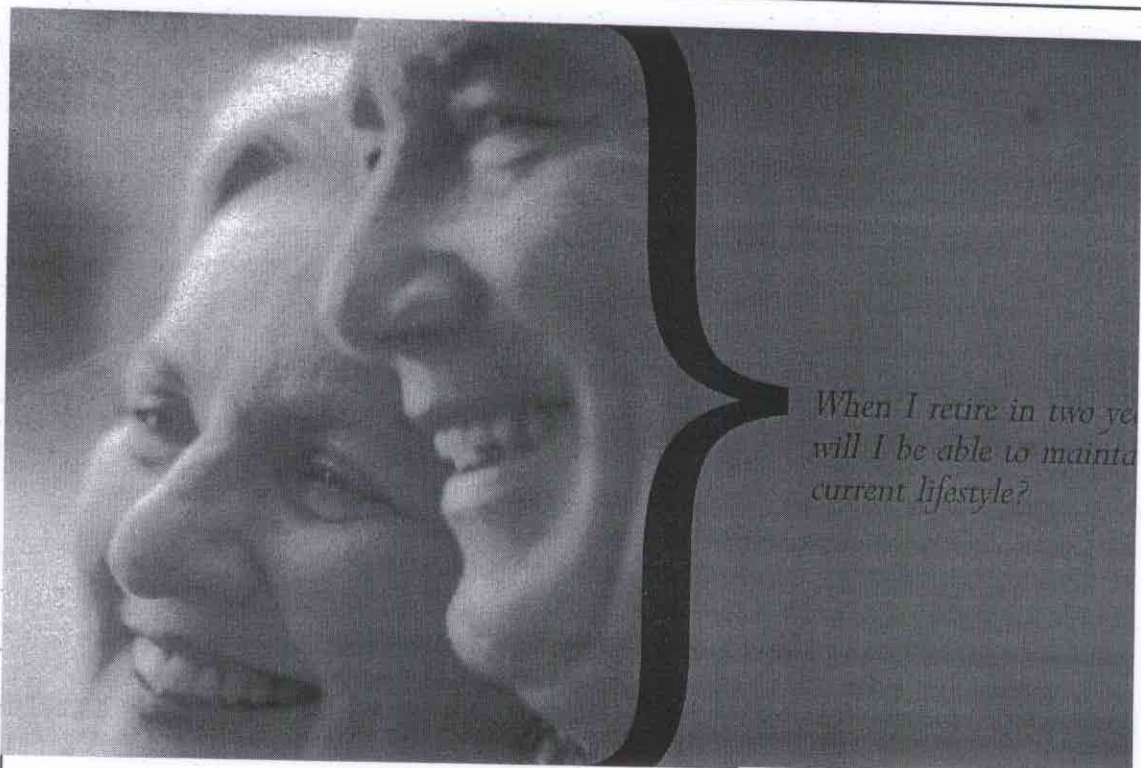
Maurice Ruffin, an attorney with Chaffe, McCall, Phillips, Toler and Sarpy LLP, said it surprised him when the firm's managing partners encouraged the attorneys to take part in the HELP program. Civil lawyers work hundreds of cases during the course of a year. Their time is precious and expensive, Ruffin said. "There is a lot of pressure so it's a special thing when a larger firm makes time for participation in something like this. The partners reduced our hours by 10 percent so we could get out in the community and help the city we live in."

Though he would claim otherwise, everybody involved with the program said Zainey is the one person most responsible for its existence and success.

What Zainey has done is incredible, Williams said. Not only is he helping the homeless but he is opening the eyes of people who would normally cringe at the sight of a man in rags begging on the corner. "He mobilized the entire Bar across the spectrum."

Zainey drove to Shreveport last week to set up a similar program and by the end of the year he hopes to have others operating in Baton Rouge and Alexandria.

"As lawyers we have an obligation to use the special skills we've been given to give back to the community and minimize homelessness as best we can," he said. •



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