

# 30-year-old nonprofit keeps fervor for service



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## Pisgah Legal Services by the numbers in 2007

Closed **3,075** total cases, assisting an estimated **7,275** children and **7,785** adults.

Assisted **3,315** children and **4,129** adults to meet basic needs.

Closed **806** domestic violence cases.

Closed **1,116** housing cases, serving more than **9,000** people in **3,075** households.

Through the Mountain Area Volunteer Lawyer Program, handled 660 cases, and almost **300** lawyers donated **2,911** hours.

Accessed **\$1,894,517** in benefits for people with disabilities, including Social Security and SSI.

Accessed an estimated **\$16,728,397** in Medicaid benefits.

Won an additional **\$5,461,215** in monetary benefits for clients.

Helped clients free up **\$1,251,182** for essential expenses.

Total quantifiable benefits: At least **\$26,954,913**.

STEVE DIXON/SDIXON@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

Maggie and Freedy Mills pose in their Hendersonville apartment. Pisgah Legal Services helped them get their landlord to make needed repairs after they were served an eviction notice.

## Pisgah Legal Services served 60,000 clients in area

By Leslie Boyd

LBOYD@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

Freedy and Maggie Mills battled a stubborn landlord for three years, asking for repairs to their apartment.

In return, the Millses said, they got an eviction notice.

Freedy Mills, 87, spent his working life as an itinerant preacher and laborer. He doesn't have a retirement account or a pension. The couple live on less than \$1,000 a month in Social Security checks.

"People think because you're poor, you'll just go away," Freedy Mills said. "But I don't let people step on me."

The couple called Pisgah Legal Services, which put them among nearly 60,000 clients served in the 30 years since the nonprofit agency opened as Legal Aid Society of Buncombe County in 1968.

The organization served its first client 30 years ago today.

Shelley Pew Brown, the Pisgah Legal attorney who handles the Millses' case, said their apartment was uninhabitable. Leaks from the apartment above left the floors damp all the time, the refrigerator was broken, the carpets were worn and dangerous, and the apartment was infested with roaches.

Once Brown became involved, the repairs began.

Bill Whalen arrived in 1980 as a staff attorney. He's the senior attorney on staff now.

"There are so many cases where we have helped people stay in their homes or get access to medical care or get relief against the bad guy," Whalen said.

Whalen recalled one man who called and asked if the credit card companies would pursue his wife if he committed suicide.

The man had become disabled and unable to keep up with his bills. He owned nothing of value.

### WEB EXTRAS

Visit [CITIZEN-TIMES.com/extras](http://CITIZEN-TIMES.com/extras) to hear Pisgah Legal Services attorney Bill Whalen talk about the work at his agency. Also, hear former board chair Kerry Friedman talk about the history of the agency.

"We were able to get the credit card companies to stop harassing him," Whalen said. "I really believed we saved his life."

Jim Barrett, executive director of Pisgah Legal Services, signed on as a "community lawyer" fresh out of law school 25 years ago.

"As an attorney here, you're proud of helping people get access to medication or housing because that saves lives," Barrett said. "It's so much more urgent than giving people access to the justice system."

Please see **NONPROFIT** on B2

# NONPROFIT: Former chairman refers to agency as 'conscience' of the area

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People must be at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty level to qualify for help from Pisgah Legal Services. Barrett estimates at least 70,000 people are eligible in the seven principal counties Pisgah Legal serves: Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, Polk, Rutherford, Transylvania and Yancey.

Even more people make the cut when ongoing health expenses and child care expenses are deducted from their income.

Kerry Friedman, past board chairman of Pisgah Legal Services, said the need is one of the most frustrating things legal aid agencies face.

"The need always outstrips the ability to provide," he said. "But PLS provides completely holistic and incredibly effective legal services."

Pisgah Legal has a number of specialty programs, including the Mountain Area Volunteer Lawyers Program, which screens cases and gives them to volunteer attorneys. Last year, volunteers handled 660 cases, donating nearly 3,000 hours.

Other programs specialize in children's law, domestic violence and elder law.

Pisgah Legal Services separated from Legal Services Corp. and stopped accepting federal legal aid funding in the mid-1980s, Friedman said.

"There were just too many restrictions on the money," he said. "It really cut into the kind of cases we could take and the people we could help. ... I call Pisgah Legal the conscience of the 28th Judicial District."

For Fready and Maggie Mills, it means they can continue to stay in their home, and that home is in decent shape.

"We still need some work done," Fready Mills said. "But we have a place here, and without Pisgah Legal, we'd have been thrown out."

Those words exemplify why Whalen has been with Pisgah Legal for so long.

"Every day, I'm able to make a difference in someone's life," he said. "A real difference."

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