

Legal clinic helps bring justice to E. Palo Alto

By Curtis J. Sitomer

ON one side of the freeway, there is affluence and success; on the other, poverty and despair. Until recently, there were few attempts to bridge the gap.

Posh West Palo Alto houses the white and wealthy. Among them, savvy businessmen and well-heeled scholars. Its world-renowned research facilities are neatly nestled among expensive garden-graced private homes. Fashionable boutiques crown a bustling business district. Assured professionals swarm the avenues. And on the hill prestigious Stanford University annually churns out a cadre of future national leaders.

Just five miles away, here in East Palo Alto, the contrast is sharp. Poverty, joblessness, and lack of education and opportunities are characteristics that aptly describe this modest, often stark, community of 18,000. Eighty-five percent of the residents come from minority backgrounds; one-third of the community are Hispanic. A majority are on welfare or eligible for old-age assistance. Homes are old, sometimes ramshackle. Renters far outnumber owners. The high school dropout rate tops 50 percent. Crime and delinquency are all too apparent. Legal and medical assistance are at a premium. Justice is sometimes unevenly dispensed.

But East Palo Alto is not a town without hope. Of late, community development programs have helped it address some of its economic and political problems. And now a symbol of justice stands by a renovated old house on the edge of town — a sign advertising a community-based legal clinic that provides, at low or no cost, counseling and courtroom services to those grappling with domestic disputes to criminal matters to immigration conflicts.

Largely staffed by law school volunteers from Stanford — who back up a handful of bona fide poverty law experts — the fledgling East Palo Alto Commu-

East Palo Alto, Calif.

nity Law Project (EPACLIP) has served over 800 clients in its first year of operation.

At the outset, student interns canvassed the community — knocking on 2,000 doors to assess case priorities, inform citizens of EPACLIP's availability and services, and establish that they were really there to help.

"There was some suspicion at first," admits Omowali Satterwaite, an 18-year

Until recently, East Palo Alto boasted only two private attorneys — and their fees were out of the range of most residents.

Mayor Mouton stresses that high legal costs affect how justice serves the poor. Young minority males who get into trouble with the law "often plead guilty because they don't know any better," she explains. The municipal official also points out that widows, female heads of house-

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Law student Wright with client: clinic work changed her outlook

resident who heads East Palo Alto's Community Development Institute. But Mr. Satterwaite explains that EPACLIP filled an important void. "We had a potpourri of problems in the community — teen-age [delinquency], parenting, school advocacy, domestic violence — which needed a base of legal services," he says. "The important thing is that they [EPACLIP] created a trust . . . and they didn't raise false expectations."

East Palo Alto Mayor Barbara Mouton — a San Francisco Bay Area native who has spent 30 years in the community — is particularly enthusiastic about the project. She says it provides legal assistance which was not previously available.

holds, and senior citizens in a community like East Palo Alto also tend to have special legal needs.

The executive director of the East Palo Alto Community Law Project, Susan Balliet — a longtime civil rights champion — says that sharp cutbacks in federal antipoverty programs by the Reagan administration make the community law project's role even more vital.

She explains that the East Palo Alto clinic has had to pick up the slack to provide advocacy in many areas, such as landlord-tenant disputes and clashes with the government over public benefits.

Recently, Miss Balliet successfully

Please see LAW PROJECT next page