

# East Palo Altans have a lawyer of their own

By Chris Kenrick  
Times Tribune staff

EAST PALO ALTO — There are more than 800 practicing lawyers in Palo Alto.

In East Palo Alto, there is one.

Donald Lawson, 36, hung up his shingle at the corner of University Avenue and Weeks Street last year after passing the California bar exam on his first try.

He came to East Palo Alto, he said, "because there was a need for legal representation in this area."

While Palo Alto lawyers serve affluent residents up and down the Peninsula in addition to the extensive corporate legal needs of Silicon Valley, Lawson mainly serves East Palo Alto residents, many of whom don't have much money.

His caseload resembles that of many small-town lawyers — some criminal defense work, divorces, personal injury lawsuits, contract disputes, wills.

In Lawson's view, the legal needs of East Palo Altans are about the same as the legal needs of people anywhere.

"People need to have their wills made and their estates planned no matter how small their estates may be," he said. Despite East Palo

Alto's reputation as a low-income community, "there are a lot of people here who can afford to pay a lawyer," Lawson added.

Lawson, a soft-spoken man who attended the University of Portland on a basketball scholarship, first came to East Palo Alto as a young college graduate to teach social studies at Nairobi High School, which now is the Gertrude Wilks Academy.

A short time later he and his wife, June, moved their family to Santa Clara, where Lawson taught social studies at Cupertino's Monta Vista High School and a course on black political thought at Foothill College's division of continuing education.

During this period, Lawson himself was almost constantly in school, earning several masters' degrees from San Jose State University.

It wasn't until 1977 that Lawson decided he wanted to become a lawyer and quit his teaching job. By that time, the Lawsons had three children to support and June Lawson was a full-time student.

For the next four years, Donald Lawson supported his family with odd jobs while commuting daily to

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Times Tribune photo by Norbert von der Groeben

East Palo Alto's only lawyer, Donald Lawson, poses in his office with his family — Nwandi, 13; Kala, 10; his wife, June; and Myani, 7.

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San Francisco for classes at the New College of California School of Law.

"It was hard," he admitted. "I worked odd jobs and I burned up my Volvo commuting more than 100 miles a day."

Lawson graduated from law school in May 1981 and passed the

California bar exam that summer.

Unlike many prospective lawyers, Lawson didn't have time to worry about whether he would pass the difficult exam.

"I had to pass. I had three kids — I had no choice," he said.

One of the most memorable days of his life was the day in December 1981 when he was sworn in as a member of the California bar in ceremonies at the Masonic Auditorium in San Francisco.

Although it means competition

for clients, Lawson said he welcomes plans by students at Stanford Law School to open a full-time legal clinic in East Palo Alto.

The Stanford students, who recently won a \$125,000 grant from the San Francisco Foundation for their project, plan an office with four practicing lawyers and 25 volunteer law students to serve the community.

"I think it's very positive. This community needs as much help as it can get," Lawson said.

*E.P.A. BIOGRAPHY*