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Guest Columnist

Sixty-seven years ago... As we celebrate another year gone by at Community Legal Aid, I've been thinking a lot about our earliest days. What must it have been like to start our organization? What was it that led a small group of attorneys to come together to form the first legal aid society in our area?

These attorneys must have understood that a civil society that did not provide equal access to justice would not remain a civil society for long. These attorneys, many of whom likely served our country in World War II, would have witnessed first-hand what happens when a country rejects justice as a core societal value. These attorneys created Legal Aid because their love of country led to an abiding sense that it was their duty as lawyers to ensure that everybody has equal access to justice.

In short -- patriotism and professionalism.

Much has changed in our community over the past 67 years. We have experienced, throughout central northeast Ohio, tremendous economic decline following the deindustrialization of the region. And while much of that started 40 to 50 years ago, the effects remain strikingly apparent today.

Ask anybody in the Mahoning Valley about Black Monday, and they'll tell you about the day Youngstown Sheet and Tube announced its immediate closing, instantly leaving 5000 workers without jobs. My own father-in-law was laid off from a well paying union job at a steel mill to become a minimum-wage security guard.

Akron lost much of its rubber and tire manufacturing jobs. Canton lost most of its steel industry. Even our smaller communities like Wooster did not escape, losing thousands of jobs when RubberMaid was bought out and moved its headquarters and production elsewhere.

Every person in our community is probably one or two degrees of separation from somebody directly impacted by the loss of these jobs. And the latest blow was just this year, with GM's plant in Lordstown closing.

Even when things were good in our region, our African-American brothers and sisters often were denied access to the same opportunities in jobs, education, and housing. The legacy of these discriminatory practices of both the private sector and the government continues to impact our neighbors today.

But these are not challenges that lead us to despair. These are challenges that call us to recommit to the patriotism and professionalism of our founders. My colleagues at Legal Aid are committed to doing all we can to make justice for all a reality. But just as the first Legal Aid staffers relied on the support and professionalism of the founders, so do we today rely on the support of our entire community, especially the private bar, to support our mission.

And in this season of hope, we were reminded that the patriotism and professionalism of our founders does indeed live on in our community. At the recent Bradford M. "Buck" Gearinger Professionalism Dinner of the Akron Bar Association honoring Judge Patricia A. Cosgrove, retired, of the Summit County Court of Common Pleas, the law firm of Perantinides and Nolan announced a gift of \$25,000 to Community Legal Aid in honor of Judge Cosgrove. And this gift will be the seed money for the Judge Patricia A. Cosgrove Legal Aid Fund, a permanent endowment fund for Community Legal Aid with the Akron Community Foundation.

Just as the seed planted by our founders grew into the current Community Legal Aid, with 37 attorneys serving eight counties and over 11,000 residents every year, we are hopeful that this seed planted by Perantinides and Nolan will grow into a significant endowment fund to make justice for all a reality.

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