For a man at home in the ethereal language of poetry, his tone is a dash of cold water in the face, even twenty-one centuries later.

“It is your business when the wall next door catches fire” lectured the Roman poet Horace. His stern admonition is really a timeless reminder. Horace was simply saying that no one can afford to ignore the well being of his neighbor.

That ancient advice has not been lost on The Catholic University of America School of Law. While training some of the best and brightest legal minds in the business, the school has always remembered that among the many roles it fulfills, it is also a neighbor, a title that carries distinct obligations.

The law school and entire Catholic University campus sit majestically in the middle of a quiet swath of Northeast Washington, bordered in large part by a long-established community known as Brookland. Like most urban neighborhoods, Brookland’s demographics have shifted over the years. Once a solid working middle-class enclave, its population has gradually become poorer as jobs and incomes began to disperse. Many of today’s residents are low-income elderly, or disadvantaged teens, or immigrants with limited English skills. One of the few common denominators the community has is the frequent need for competent and reliable legal help for coping with life’s myriad problems. In many low-income communities, such aid would remain unaffordably out of reach. But the people of Brookland are luckier. They have a neighbor.

For more than thirty years, Columbus Community Legal Services has been the last wall, the final bulwark against disaster for people in the direst of straights. It has blocked eviction-minded slumlords from piling a baby’s furniture on the sidewalk. It has recovered money bilked from the elderly poor by con artists or unscrupulous contractors. It has helped win protective court orders against abusive husbands and fathers, and taught vulnerable families where to find help. Legal Services attorneys instruct teens on how to recognize and extricate themselves from violent relationships. They offer the indigent professional, caring, and dignified representation for a nearly limitless variety of criminal and civil matters. And the bill presented to the client is always the same: nothing.

[CCLS] “is Catholic’s shining star,” comments Sharon Murphy, director of Mary House, a Brookland-based housing and outreach program that helps to demystify life in the United States for immigrant families. To that end, law students have offered Mary House clients training for parent advocacy skills, school rights and consumer rights. “Their attitude is, even if we can’t help you with this, we’ll figure out a way to get you what you need. I think they rock!” raves Murphy.

“Our biggest service to the community is as a morale-builder,” says Michael McGonigal, the director of the clinic’s specialty service for the elderly. “People know they have someone to turn to in time of need. It eases the feeling of abandonment that overtakes people liv-
“Help thy neighbor”

ing in the city, especially, poor and elderly people who now find themselves living alone.”

“They are an invaluable resource for us,” declares Robert Currence, a program coordinator for MELD/Evenstart, a family literacy project that serves teen parents. Legal Service student-attorneys have worked closely with his program for years, conducting workshops and guiding the very young parents to the resources they need. Currence said he cannot recall a single instance in which a piece of legal advice or strategy offered by a clinic member turned out to be wrong. “If they don’t know something, they have no problem saying so. They’ll say, let me research that and get back to you.”

Columbus Community Legal Services began in 1969 with a dual purpose. It would provide desperately needed legal services to those who could not afford their own lawyer. And it would offer motivated students the training and skills to blow the dust off the textbooks and breathe the pepper and fire of real life into arcane classroom concepts. Students would argue real cases before live judges with lasting consequences. They would take depositions, strategize, and square off against opposing counsel. They would stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the oppressed and fight for the powerless. Everyone would gain something. That was the idea, and for a quarter of a century it’s worked remarkably well.

For the first twenty-five years the clinic was as local as Pop’s Barber Shop. Occupying various locations on North Capitol Street, it always met the first criteria for serving the underserved: it was accessible. Since 1994 CCLS has been located in the main law school building, but is still easy to reach by metro, foot or car. Although the clinic’s budget is separate from the law school’s, the law school still provides nearly all of its funding, including salaries for the five faculty members who staff and oversee the operation. Some monies also come from the outside, include annual grants from the D.C. Bar Foundation and the firm of Wilmer, Cutler and Pickering.

“I believe that we’re a premier law firm, but not exclusively that, …we also have to offer premier teaching and educational opportunities, and I think we do. Students learn from each other, from us, and from the design of the program. They learn a tremendous amount from their clients.”

“The numbers of people who are going to court pro se, without attorneys, is staggering. Especially in the family divisions.” Those who do secure CCLS representation usually come away satisfied, says Brustin. The fact that their counsels are still learning the profession is not necessarily a drawback. “They see that the student attorneys are often much more prepared, much more articulate and ready to pursue a case than opposing attorneys,” she observes. Nancy Glassman, a CUA law graduate who volunteers at the clinic, echoes the sentiment.

“We had one client who baked us a cake every time we filed a motion. She made the world’s best pineapple upside down cake. I hated to see that case end!”
jokes McGonnigal.

For all of its successful interventions, however, there are still unmet legal needs in low-income neighborhoods both near and far in the District of Columbia. In recent years clinic supervisors have noticed a growing demand for help with immigration problems, consumer rights, and the practice of predatory lending.

“I just wish they had more students,” comments Robert Currence. But expanded resources would not necessarily expand the legal clinic’s mission. Volunteer Nancy Glassman points out that “it is important that we remain student-attorneys, not student social workers.”

The larger Catholic University law school community frequently fills that role, where a variety of student groups roll up their sleeves and plunge in to help. Volunteer Income Tax Assistance, for example, is a program that helps the elderly chop through the confusing thicket of their tax forms. Shadow Day, run by the Black Law Students Association, pairs local high school students with law school mentors to answer questions about the law as a career. Other law student groups organize food and clothing drives, Earth Day cleanups, Bingo with seniors, and Christmas Gift collections.

Charity begins in the classroom. Many faculty members do pro bono work on their own time, or find other ways in which to help. In July, for example, Professor David Lipton and staff members spent a morning conducting a tour of the law school for some local fourth graders. The lively eight-year-olds were shown the library and computer center, and were even walked through the discovery process of a staged “crime” while wearing judicial robes. (Thanks for letting us wear your capes! – chirped one student.)

A venerable old insurance company has dibs on the wonderful advertising slogan, like a good neighbor, State Farm is there…but the line applies equally well to The Catholic University of America School of Law, and especially, Columbus Community Legal Services. The clinic is also there, year after year, making a tremendous difference in people’s lives. It cannot meet every need nor solve every problem, but it never ceases to look for ways in which to reach out a hand.

“Samuel Gompers was famous for saying that American Labor had a one word platform: ‘More.’ We are doing the right things. We just have to do more of them,” observes McGonnigal.

CCLS provides help and hope to people who need it most. It is an irreplaceable resource for its neighbors and an incomparable opportunity for the dedicated students who work there. The clinic’s managing director, Alvita Eason, sums it up best.

“I’ve seen students who are unsure about whether or not they’re going to fit within the profession, be able to be lawyers. And then they come here. They work on cases. They work with clients. And they end up succeeding beyond their wildest imagination. Suddenly, it’s like ‘wow, I can do this. I can do something that really matters.’ That makes you feel good.”

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**Columbus Community Legal Services (CCLS) Notable Victories**

**Advocacy for the Elderly** — one of very few law school clinics geared to the needs of evening division students.

- Litigating in Federal District Court in Maryland, students helped foil an attempt by the Social Security Administration to collect an alleged overpayment from one of the clinic’s indigent and disabled clients.
- Students forced a crooked contractor to replace his poorly built roof on the home of an elderly person. They even enlisted a volunteer from the School of Architecture to make sure the job was done right!

**Families and the Law Clinic**

- Students obtained a civil protection order for a woman whose husband had threatened to kill her upon his release from jail. The client is currently in hiding.
- Won back custody of a child that had been illegally snatched by its father and taken across state lines.
- FALC students continue to conduct teen dating violence workshops in high schools all over the District of Columbia. The approach is so successful that one clinic graduate is now teaching the course to teens in Kosovo, “because violence is a hot topic in the Balkans.”

**General Practice Clinic**

- Students challenged the D.C. public school system for ignoring the special education needs of an 11-year old boy. The back-and-forth legal battle resulted in the child’s placement in private school, plus six years of compensatory education services.
- In a memorable case, student-attorneys helped a client collect a substantial portion of the $50,000 owed her in overdue child support. A brief incarceration for the defendant proved to be enough to start the money flowing.