



Civil caretakers

By CARY ASPINWALL World Scene Writer
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Legal Aid helps with more than court

Viva Roland just wants to keep taking care of her great-granddaughter, like she has since Megan was a baby.

Roland is 88. Her great-granddaughter is 16. Taking care of a teenager with developmental disabilities in your 80s is no small feat, but Roland accomplishes it with grace.

So volunteers from Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma wanted to make Roland's life a little bit easier.

Bill Jackson, a volunteer attorney for Legal Aid, helped Roland get legal guardianship of Megan in 1998, and has helped her file her annual report to the courts every year since.

Each year during his visit, he noticed her home needed some repairs and touch-ups. So Legal Aid, a United Way agency, came to the rescue again -- this time with paint brushes and primer instead of court filings and affidavits.



Viva Roland smiles as she talks about the volunteers from Legal Aid and Benham Cos. who helped renovate her home as part of United Way's Day of Caring. The updates make it easier for her to focus on caring for her great-granddaughter, Megan. "She's a lot of company," Roland says.

STEPHEN HOLMAN / Tulsa World



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Legal Aid helps thousands of people such as Roland in northeastern Oklahoma each year, said Scott Hamilton, managing attorney for the Tulsa office.

The nonprofit law firm provides free legal help for low-income persons and senior citizens with civil legal problems.

By some estimates, as much as 80 percent of the poor's legal needs go unmet in this country each year.

In 1963, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Gideon v. Wainwright* guaranteed criminal defendants the right to an appointed attorney if they can't afford counsel.

But there's no equivalent right in civil court for those who can't afford attorneys to fight custody battles, evictions, foreclosures or other civil court matters.

Legal Aid started in World War II as an effort by the American Bar Association to help spouses of servicemen, and continued after the war with United Way assistance, Hamilton said.

For more than 25 years, there's been a Tulsa office operating from a mix of federal and state funds, United Way funds and private donations, he said.

Legal Aid's Tulsa office has about 15 full- and part-time attorneys on staff to help with cases and the service's phone hotline.

Without the help of volunteers at Legal Aid, people such as Viva Roland would have to fend for themselves in guardianship cases, fighting wage garnishments or for unemployment compensation.

"Our principle focus is to protect people from harm, and protect housing rights and basic income," Hamilton said. "We try to focus on basic needs, work for equal justice."

Roland came to Legal Aid for help when she needed to establish legal guardianship of her great-granddaughter for school paperwork and medical care. She was the only family member able to take care of Megan, a special needs child.

"It's something I knew I had to do, so I just did it," Roland said. "She's a lot of company."

Legal Aid sees lots of guardianship cases similar to Roland's, because Oklahoma has one of the highest rates of grandparents raising grandchildren in the nation, according to U.S. Census figures.

Nationally, about one in 10 children is raised by a grandparent, but that number is estimated to be about one in six in Oklahoma.

Independence is something she admires, because she embodies it.

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