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Baltimore's Legal Clinic

by Edward Coltman

(Mr. Coltman is a reporter for Baltimore Sunpapers. This article appeared in *The Sunday Sun* on September 12, 1976, and is reprinted here with the author's permission.)

The man had been separated from his wife for years, but he could never get up the money or the energy for a divorce. A couple of weeks ago he wandered into a sparsely-furnished storefront office on Eastern avenue, the Legal Clinic of Cawley, Schmidt and Sharrow, and soon was talking to a lawyer—for free.

They talked about his case, and about the cost if he decided to file. Then he left. A few days passed, and late one night one of the other lawyers got a telephone call from the man. He was in a phone booth and had made up his mind. It was an emergency, he said. After nearly two decades, he just had to get a divorce right away.

The legal clinic began to work on his case, and a man who had thought for so long that legal assistance was beyond his reach had a lawyer at last—at a cost he could afford.

The Legal Clinic of Cawley, Schmidt and Sharrow, P.A., is about to set off a debate the likes of what the local bar hasn't heard in years. Operating from the storefront at 2117 Eastern avenue for only a month now, the legal clinic is already under investigation by the state Attorney Grievance Commission, to whom local bar officials have referred complaints from other lawyers.

Right now, the controversy is confined to whether a television news report about the clinic and a radio talk-show interview with one of the lawyers constituted advertising—a breach of the Code of Professional Responsibility. But the question of whether those two brushes with publicity will get the lawyers running the clinic in trouble pales in comparison with the probable reaction among lawyers to a no-frills, low-cost,

high-volume legal practice with high profit potential.

The Cawley, Schmidt and Sharrow practice is believed to be the first of its kind on the Eastern Seaboard. On the West Coast, where the opening of the Los Angeles-area clinic of Jacoby and Meyers rocked the bar four years ago, disciplinary charges against Leonard Jacoby and Stephen Meyers are still pending before the California Supreme Court. But the climate has changed enough that the state bar association there has recently recommended changing the rules to permit use of the term "legal clinic"—a description that used to be considered "unprofessional."

The Cawley, Schmidt and Sharrow clinic's "style" and basic assumptions run contrary to those held by most in the legal profession. They are not the slightest bit reticent in talking about money; a listing of typical fees charged for routine legal work is prominently posted in the waiting room and included in an explanatory brochure provided to walk-in clients.

"We don't want to be known as the Jack Luskins of the bar," said Ronald M. Sharrow, 41, a lawyer for 12 years and one of three principals in the clinic, "because, first, we may not be the cheapest guys in town—I don't know—but we do want to offer legal services that average people can afford, and second, because, although we want to charge the lowest fees we can, we aren't interested in price competition.

"We don't think that there are just so many clients around and we're going to be taking business away from other lawyers. We think there are a lot of people who wouldn't go to any lawyer at all, but who might come here because they finally believe that they can afford a lawyer."

Their fees are substantially lower than the average fees charged in Baltimore and Maryland, according to an economic survey prepared last year for the Maryland State Bar Association. The charge for consultation after the first free conference is \$25 an hour, compared to \$43 an hour for the average solo practitioner or associate in a law firm and \$52 an hour for the average law firm partner.

The fee for appearing in District Court

is \$125, well above the low fee of \$50 reported in the survey, but well below the average \$160. And the normal fee for a simple uncontested divorce without a property settlement agreement is \$150, compared to an average \$344.

But the thinking behind those fees is unusual, too. Part of it is the belief that much of the work lawyers do themselves could be done by properly trained and supervised assistants. Another part of it assumes that operating costs can be cut by running much of the routine paper work through computers and modern administrative systems.

Still another assumption is that there is a place among lawyers for a legal practice that handles only large numbers of routine cases for average clients and refers almost all complicated, time-consuming work to other lawyers.

"We think that law is a consumer issue," said Linda C. Cawley, a 27-year-old lawyer admitted to the bar a year ago who helped start the clinic. "In law school, we talked about the ethical problems of the bar not being able to provide legal services to so many people, and we think that anything we can do to change that—from using Ron Sharrow's forms for paperwork to teaching people step-by-step how to handle their own cases—is worth trying."

But John Slowiak, a 26-year-old lawyer hired primarily as a researcher, added: "When I was hired, I was told—and it was made very clear to me—that I was to spend all the time that's necessary on the research. You can't afford to have a lawyer who's not prepared, no matter how low the fee."

And William R. Schmidt 3d, 27, another lawyer who helped start the clinic, said, "Right now, there's nothing more important for us than to do quality work, because it's going to be so closely scrutinized, and if someone tries this and messes up, that could destroy a good idea."

Meanwhile, out on Eastern avenue, the clients fill the waiting room on a busy Thursday evening, the clinic partners have leased space for another office in the Dulaney Valley Shopping Center in Towson, and everyone is waiting to see what will happen to the month-old experiment with a "good idea."