

# Bridging the

**S**itting in the back of a Washington, D.C., courtroom, Marla Spindel, JD '93, listened carefully. Two parents were trying to agree on a visitation schedule for their son before a Superior Court judge. The young lawyer helping with the negotiations was part of Ms. Spindel's D.C. Volunteer Lawyers Project.

The case was full of troubling details: drugs, guns, and a shooting witnessed by the six-year-old son. The boy was the actual client represented by Ms. Spindel's group. He wasn't in court that day, but she was confident he would get what he needed because she had a crackerjack lawyer on the case.

"When I first starting taking cases," she says, "I was crying to my husband about what I was going to do [about the children]. No one seemed to be listening to me. Now I feel more empowered. I know what to do. I know what services can be provided. I can't fix the system, but I can make it a little bit better."

Ms. Spindel co-founded DCVLP in 2008 with two other lawyers. Since then, the organization, which runs on grants from foundations and private individuals, has attracted more than 600 registered lawyers, many of whom are returning to work after taking time off to raise families. Lawyers volunteer their time, working with low-income clients on a range of issues, from custody disputes to domestic violence, immigration, divorce, and adoption.

The needs are great in the nation's capital. According to the group's website, 98 percent of people seeking civil protection orders have no lawyer; 77 percent of those trying to obtain custody of their children

or a divorce do so without counsel; and 38 percent of people wishing to adopt children represent themselves in court.

Children have the least representation of all, Ms. Spindel says, especially those with special needs. "We are typically appointed by the court to represent the best interests of a child [as a guardian ad litem] in custody cases where the children have special needs or there are allegations of abuse or neglect," she explains.

Half of the children she sees in these cases have some kind of learning or physical disability, autism, or a mental health concern. "There is a silent epidemic," she says. "And many of the parents themselves come out of foster care and are not able to advocate for themselves or their children."

DCVLP lawyers visit homes, schools, and daycare centers to find out how well a child is living and coping. They check court records to see if parents have criminal cases pending. Judges rely on these reports and the recommendations of DCVLP lawyers to

suggest the best possible custody arrangement for a child where he or she can be safe and have his or her needs met.

"There has been a growing gap in legal services for the indigent population [in Washington, D.C.]—particularly in the area of domestic violence and family law," says Laurie Kohn, who runs the family justice litigation clinic at GW. She also co-chairs the D.C. Superior Court's Domestic Violence Task Force and sits on the DCVLP board. "The brilliance of their staffing model is that it taps into a population of extremely qualified but underutilized lawyers. Their staffing model, which includes training,



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—Marla Spindel

# Gap

## D.C. VOLUNTEER LAWYERS PROJECT SERVES MANY WASHINGTONIANS IN NEED.

BY LAURA HAMBLETON

close supervision, and mentorship, also ensures top-quality legal services.”

Last year the group handled 357 cases, about 50 involving children, and DCVLP expects more this year, according to Claudia Gwilliam, JD '01, DCVLP's managing director. She runs the organization on a budget of \$350,000, paying for office space, malpractice insurance, litigation expenses, and other costs associated with representing clients in family court matters.

“We can take as many cases as we have volunteers to get those cases processed,” she says. “We do all our own training. Once an attorney is trained, she shadows another attorney for her first case. The lead attorney speaks in court. There is a paid managing attorney supervising every single day. All written reports are reviewed by a managing attorney. We really have thought this out.”

Almost 20 years ago, when Ms. Spindel graduated from GW, she followed a different path. Law jobs were hard to come by, and she had loans to repay. She accepted a job with a corporate law firm, Reed Smith LLP, and then went on to work at a health care firm, Powers Pyles Sutter & Verville, PC. After her daughter was born in late summer 2006, she decided not to return to the firm. But she did want to continue with a pro bono guardian ad litem case she'd started while employed there.

She quickly realized the drawbacks to being a solo pro bono lawyer. Malpractice insurance was expensive. She didn't have anyone to discuss ideas with. Another single practitioner, Jenny Brody, approached her to pool resources.



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They brought in a third attorney, Karen Barker Marcou, and started the nonprofit in Ms. Brody's living room in Chevy Chase, Md. “She is a good cook, and I would bring dessert,” Ms. Spindel says.

The three formed a 501(c)(3) and went looking for other lawyers who wanted to give back to the community. They posted notices on neighborhood and school listservs. Thirty lawyers showed up to their first meeting, donated money, and signed on to volunteer. More recently, GW graduates and students have volunteered as well.

“We've had undergraduate interns, grad-

uate-level externs (women's studies master's candidates), a 2L law extern, and currently an LLM graduate intern,” Ms. Gwilliam says. “Last fall we hosted four GW Law School Road to the Future fellows. This year, I'm in the process of screening and interviewing applicants for the new Pathways to Practice Fellowship that will begin mid to late August and last up to one year.”

In the past four years, Ms. Spindel often has drawn upon the skills she learned in Alfreda Robinson's law class at GW. “I remember learning trial skills with Dean Robinson,” she says. “You had to get on your feet and practice being a litigator.

“I always did want to help people in need, especially children,” she adds. “It is my calling. It just took awhile to get there.” **GW**

For more information about the D.C. Volunteer Lawyers Project, visit the group's website at [www.dcvlp.org](http://www.dcvlp.org).