

# LEGAL AID SOCIETY OF MIDDLE TENNESSEE AND THE CUMBERLANDS

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## **LEGAL AID SOCIETY ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

*Wiltshire has held post since 1976.*

NASHVILLE, Tenn., June 13, 2007 The board of directors of the Legal Aid Society recently announced the retirement of Executive Director Ashley Wiltshire, effective at the end of June. A search committee is currently evaluating candidates for a new executive director. General Counsel Neil McBride will serve as interim executive director.

“Ashley’s dedication to seeking justice for Tennessee families serves as an inspiration to the board and to the legal profession,” said Kathryn Edge, president of the board of directors and an attorney with Miller & Martin. “He retires knowing he has helped thousands of Middle Tennesseans who had nowhere else to turn.”

Wiltshire joined Legal Aid Society in 1970 as a summer clerk while he was a second-year law student at Vanderbilt University. He became executive director in 1976 at the age of 35.

“When I started, there were four or five lawyers in the Stahlman Building downtown,” he said. “Legal Aid Society was in its youth. It was only two years old in 1970. We were excited about making a difference. And 37 years later, we still are.”

“I first became interested in the law when I was in the seminary. One summer, I was working with an interracial ministry in Georgia. We were doing good work. Really helping people. But there was a group of law students down there at the same time, and they seemed to be getting more done than we were. That got me thinking that maybe I could be more effective in helping people if I became a lawyer.”

Federal funding for legal aid began in 1965. Nashville’s Legal Aid Society was founded shortly thereafter, in 1968, by a coalition of attorneys led by Harris Gilbert, today a senior partner in Wyatt Tarrant & Combs. The real growth of the organization began in 1976, when the federal funding was increased with the goal of making legal services available in every county in the country by 1980. The increase in funding allowed Legal Aid

Society to open offices in Murfreesboro, Gallatin and Clarksville. By 1980, Legal Aid Society had 33 lawyers serving 14 counties.

“It was a time of real growth,” Wiltshire recalled. “I remember that around this time a management consultant came in and criticized us for running the organization like a mom and pop grocery store. He said we needed systems..

“The truth is, we still operate without a lot of elaborate management systems. We have a very collegial and participatory culture. As far as I can remember, we have never taken a vote during managing attorney meetings. Decisions are made by consensus.

“When everyone discovered the Japanese participatory management style several years ago, we realized that it was what we had been doing all along. It works here, I believe, because we all have a common goal – to be the best law firm for low income people that we can be. There really is no other agenda. Everyone is pulling in the same direction, which makes the job of the executive director much easier. You don’t really need to manage. Just preside,” Wiltshire said.

In the 1980s, federal funding to legal aid was severely cut. Ever the optimist, Wiltshire said this turned out to be a good thing. The Nashville Bar Association formed the Pro Bono Program, and the Legal Aid Society began its annual fundraising campaign.

“Nashville has a very supportive and generous legal community,” he said. “There has been strong leadership in the bar, and we have had great leadership in the fundraising campaigns.”

In 1988 the Nashville Pro Bono Program joined with Legal Aid Society. In 2002, Legal Aid Society merged with Rural Legal Services of Tennessee and increased its coverage area to 48 counties.

“The merger has been a great thing,” Wiltshire said. “There has been a synergy as different people and interests have joined together.”

Today, Legal Aid Society has 33 lawyers to serve 48 counties. Federal dollars represent less than half of the funding. Other funding comes from the State of Tennessee, more than 25 grants and contracts and the successful annual fundraising campaign. Wiltshire said that while funding will always be an issue, Legal Aid Society is in a much better position now to deal with that issue.

Through it all, Wiltshire describes his role as that of janitor. “In ancient Roman homes, a statue of the god Janus typically was placed over the door into a home. Janus was responsible for the welfare of those who passed through the door,” he explained. “The word janitor comes from Janus’ name. A janitor’s job is to keep the doors open so people can get their work done, and that has really been my job. We have a great staff, and it has been my privilege, with lots of wonderful support, to help keep the doors open all these years.

Founded in 1968, the Legal Aid Society is a private, not-for-profit organization governed by a local board of directors comprised of attorneys and members of the client population. Legal Aid Society provides free legal assistance in civil matters to people in 48 Middle Tennessee counties with a total eligible population of 382,000. It has offices in Nashville, Gallatin, Clarksville, Murfreesboro, Columbia, Tullahoma, Cookeville and Oak Ridge.

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