

## features

## Legal service offers advice, counseling

By Sarah West

In 1975, Dorothy Bernholz received a law degree from North Carolina Central University. And in 1975, she designed the program that formed the basis for UNC's Student Legal Services. She also became the first attorney for SLS.

"The genesis of the program started with the students," Bernholz said. "They actually envisioned a broader program. I designed one which I felt was realistic for the manpower available—i.e. me."

Bernholz said that SLS concentrates on landlord-tenant disputes and consumer action. "We can advise students in any area, but we represent them only in those two areas. However, we also can settle uncontested divorces and a limited number of traffic cases."

People who consult SLS often do not need legal advice, Bernholz said. Rather, they have a problem and aren't sure where to go with it.

"They're casting about for resources. We can direct them to the University or community source they need to contact," she said.

"We try to stress preventive legal advice," Bernholz said. "For example, we tell students to seek legal advice before they sign a lease. We also teach a street law course and speak at dorms."

"We also emphasize that the student assert his rights first. Then, if he is unsuccessful, we will intervene for him," she said.

Bernholz said that she felt one of the most important aspects of SLS was the opportunity it afforded students to interact with the legal system in a positive way.

"Many are interacting with the legal system for the first time. And when the system works and they've had a part in it, it inspires a trust in that system."

SLS, Bernholz emphasized, is a student service. As long as a student pays his student activity fees, he is entitled to receive aid from SLS.

The program is run by a student-controlled board of directors as well. There are three faculty members and four student members on the board, giving students the swing vote. There is one at-large member and representatives from Student Government, the graduate level and the Student Consumer Action Union.

The board of directors reports to the Campus Governing Council, Bernholz said. "We have double accountability to students—first to our board and through them to the CGC."

"Our board determines the areas in which we will represent students," Bernholz said.

It is important that the board make these decisions, she said, because it ensures that SLS is responsive to student needs. The board meets once a month during the regular school year.

"We have to go back to CGC each year for funding," Bernholz said. "They never give us everything we ask for, but they've never cut us back to less than we got the year before."

The salaries of both Bernholz and her fellow SLS attorney, Mark Sternlicht, are determined by the CGC. Bernholz said that her salary is much lower than that of most other lawyers on the same level.

However, there are compensations for the relatively low pay. "The psychic energy

you take away makes it worth it," Bernholz said.

"You have intelligent, appreciative clients who care about their problems. They take advice—with a few outstanding exceptions. It's problem-solving at its finest," she said.

"I've talked to other lawyers in the community who are depressed because they're not appreciated. But then, they charge a lot for their services," she added.

Bernholz said a lot of changes have occurred in SLS since 1975. The original allocation of \$20,000 has been doubled. There are two attorneys now—Bernholz and Sternlicht. Instead of a part-time secretary, there is a full-time legal assistant.

"The case-load keeps increasing," Bernholz said. "And there is a change in the kind of cases. For instance, towing is way down now. A year and a half ago, we had 15 to 20 cases a week involving towing."

"During the streaking era, we had cases dealing with that. Legal problems are seasonal," Bernholz continued. "During the football season, there are more DUIs. Domestic-relations problems increase right before Christmas."

"One good thing about SLS is that we can see recurring problems and call attention to them. There was an era when all of a sudden, tow trucks were towing cars from private spaces without following the proper procedure," Bernholz said.

"There were tow truck operators who were damaging cars, who wore guns, who threatened students. You have to call attention to these situations and take action—and that's often legal action," she said.

Many of the cases SLS deals with involve tenant-landlord disputes. Recently, they were able to help a student who felt that his landlord had not provided adequate precautions for his tenants' safety.

When the student moved into his apartment, he discovered that there were no safety locks on the windows. He informed the landlord, who failed to take action. Concerned because of the many robberies in the neighborhood, the student moved out. The landlord refused to return his deposit—SLS sued for the deposit and won.

The case was won on the grounds that the landlord had failed to "provide a fit and habitable premise" for the tenant, Bernholz



Staff photo by Sharon Clarke

Dorothy Bernholz

said. The Chapel Hill town housing code states that windows must have safety locks.

Employer disputes also are common cases at SLS.

Bernholz said that she did not like to characterize her cases according to "win/loss" because many of the cases SLS has, especially tenant-landlord problems, are not an either/or proposition.

"I believe in dispute settlement. Sometimes these cases need to be negotiated," she said.

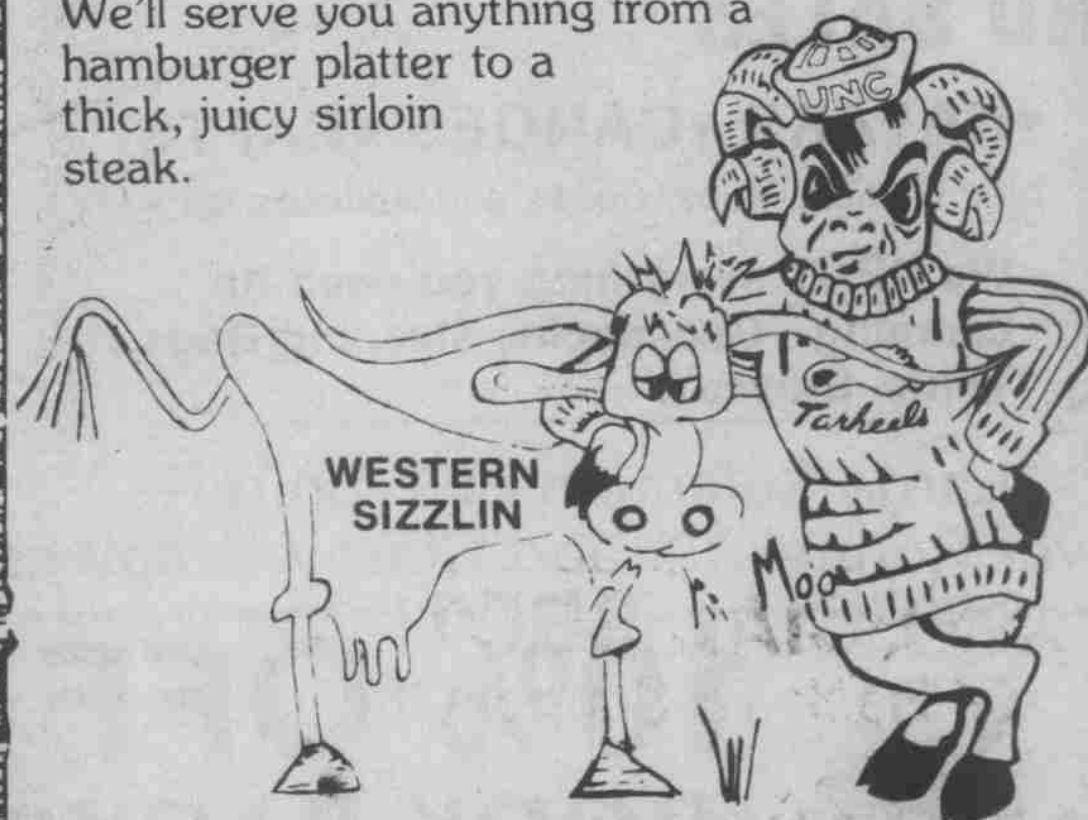
Bernholz received her undergraduate degree from UNC in 1963 and her law degree from NCCU in 1975. During the intervening years, she worked for the N.C. Fund, a Ford Foundation program, and with the School of Social Work at UNC.

Active in community affairs, Bernholz currently serves as president of the Orange County Bar Association and as secretary-treasurer of the 15th-B Judicial District.

Sternlicht received both his undergraduate and law degrees from UNC, finishing in 1978. As a law student, Sternlicht clerked for SLS for two years. SLS has several law students who volunteer their services as clerks.

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Applicants should have demonstrated administrative ability and be capable of working effectively with the many constituencies in the University community. Familiarity with a university environment is required and knowledge of the University at Chapel Hill is desirable.

Nominations and applications, along with any supporting material, should be submitted by August 15, 1980. Materials should be sent to Vice Chancellor Advisory Committee, 103 South Building 005A, UNC-Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27514.

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