

LANDLOSS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

making money, the owner will eventually lose it."

Harris was among the members of the North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers who founded the Land Loss Prevention Project in the early 1980s.

A workshop on farm loss was the jumping-off point for creation of a nonprofit law firm housed at N.C. Central University Law School, which continues to provide office space and student volunteers to the organization.

"We were touched and moved by the plight of the black farmers," says Angela Bryant, an attorney who helped organize the initial farm-loss workshop. "Some of our non-lawyer friends challenged us to see whether we couldn't get the Association of Black Lawyers to help these people. And we said, 'we'll show you.'"

One of the group's important early accomplishments was publication of a handbook called "Ten Ways to Save Your Land."

"It was a real important task for us to educate people about land loss," says Bryant, who now runs a multicultural consulting agency called Visions in Rocky Mount. "A lot of the lawyers felt like, 'How can you lose land when you have a deed?' What they didn't see was that it was loss in terms of the economic viability of the land and in some instances, a lack of legal services which led to the loss of title to it."

From its beginnings as a two-person legal referral service, the prevention project has expanded to four staff attorneys and 450 volunteers.

Satellite offices have opened in Wilson and Ahoskie, and the organization publishes a regular newsletter that connects it to farmland preservation projects nationwide.

Last year, the land-loss project helped 500 clients with farms ranging in size from five acres to 100 acres, says development director Cecelia Moore.



Pamela Simmons, left, of the Land Loss Prevention Project, and Jennifer Garnett of the N.C. Coalition of Farm and Rural Families, are working to preserve minority-owned farms.

Photo by John Fletcher Jr.

The organization's \$500,000 annual budget supported training workshops, lobbying activities and community-based farm cooperatives across North Carolina. The money comes from foundation grants, the state assembly and private donations.

Estelle Caldwell says volunteer attorneys from the land-loss project helped her win a five-year deferral on a federal Farm Home Administration loan for her 32-acre farm in Turkey Township.

"We've had the farm in our name ever since about 1977," she says. "I'm just trying to hold onto my family

land. I just want to keep it in the family."

Mattie Southerland was struggling to save her 50-acre farm in Warsaw, Duplin County, when she saw one of the land-loss public-service announcements on television.

"I was in the process of losing what I had," she says. "The Land Loss lawyer helped do the paperwork for me and helped me try to get enough funds together so whenever they decide what [debt] payments I have to make, I'll have enough."

Although Southerland has told some of her friends about the preven-

tion project, not all of them have taken advantage of the services it offers.

"Some people are kind of scared because they don't want to trust nobody," she says. "I say you got to trust somebody, and I trust them totally."

Volunteer attorneys for the land-loss project cite other obstacles in working with low-income farmers.

"My experience with farmers is that they are not business people," says board president Travis Payne, a partner in the Raleigh law firm of Edelstein and Payne.

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ANGELA BRYANT
Attorney

"I've represented about three farmers in the last five years, and in all three situations, their records were a mess."

Payne's interest in the land-loss project stemmed from a broader interest in civil rights law.

"Although at least half of our clients at Land Loss are white farmers, still, the loss of black-owned land over the last decade has been phenomenal," he says. "Part of it arises out of the fact that minorities often don't have good title to the land."

In addition to the human tragedies, board member Floyd McKissick Jr. worries about the economic implications of losing small farms.

"Certainly, in terms of what those farms produce, that could be picked up by corporate farmers," he says. "But relying on corporate farmers is a different direction to go in. I still believe there is a place for small, family-run enterprises."

During the past year, the prevention project has become involved in efforts to regulate large hog farms in Eastern North Carolina.

Harris and other staff members have been working closely with groups such as the Alliance for Responsible Swine Industry, to document environmental problems that residents say hog farms are causing in small, rural communities.

The project has also begun to field calls from farmers and lawyers in other states who see the land-loss group as a model for national farmland preservation efforts.

Reflecting on plans for the next 10 years, Harris focuses on the big picture.

"We have to increase our aid to farmers cooperatives and develop alternative uses for the land," he says. "People need to be concerned about this because part of the American dream is land ownership. That's something we don't want to lose."

Land Loss can be reached at (919) 682-5969.

TV

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

The Chapel Hill couple and other parents that had experienced similar losses founded the Group B Strep Association, a nonprofit charged with educating parents about a bacteria that infects an estimated 12,000 newborns in the United States each year.

The all-volunteer association, which is run on a \$25,000 budget out of the Burns-Fulkerson home, produces pamphlets and a newsletter and answers information requests from parents across the country.

Now, the group has caught the eye of an independent television producer who wants to include the Strep Association as one of two Tar Heel nonprofits featured in a proposed new series called "The Visionaries." The other is the Human Services Alliance

of Winston-Salem.

Bill Mosher of W.R. Mosher Productions in Boston, says he reviewed at least 400 applications from nonprofits that wanted to be part of the series designed for public television.

"I cried for about 45 minutes when I got the application from this [Strep B] group," he says. "We were looking for unique organizations that would allow us to

Hearing from other people really brings back all the emotions we've experienced

JAY FULKERSON
Founder
Group B Strep
Association

explore issues and to show what happens when one human being helps another."

Although funding for the series has yet to be nailed down, Mosher says he hopes to begin filming this fall.

Burns says she and her husband were honored their group was chosen for the program. "We've been on television before but this would be the most extensive coverage."

Are they worried that national exposure might overwhelm their small operation?

"The real purpose is to make sure that the issue gets out there," Burns says.

Since they founded the association, Group B Strep has become more widely discussed in the medical community, Fulkerson says. But he says that few physicians recommend screenings for mothers who may be carriers, and few inform parents of the existence of

the bacteria.

Running a nonprofit has become even more hectic, now that the Burns-Fulkerson family has expanded to include a three-year-old son and three-month-old daughter. Burns is on leave from her job as a financial planner for IBM, while Fulkerson works as an architect for LCDA in Chapel Hill.

Next spring, they hope to hold a national parents' meeting and update the Strep Association newsletter that

is now sent to about 3,000 families across the country.

And of course, they will keep answering their mail.

"The letters we get are pretty heart-wrenching," Fulkerson says. "Hearing from other people really brings back all the emotions we've experienced."

Information on the Group B Strep Association is available by calling (919) 932-5344.

Amending the code

State lawmakers rewrite nonprofit law

Tar Heel nonprofits will have to file annual reports with the Secretary of State's office or face being dissolved under a new version of the North Carolina Nonprofit Corporation Act that was passed last summer.

The new statute, which takes effect next July, also requires nonprofits to furnish financial statements to members of the organization who request them in writing.

The law also reduces to one from three the number of board members required for nonprofits.

"That's less accountability," says Leslie Takahashi, program associate

with the North Carolina Center for Nonprofits in Raleigh. "But it may or may not be a real change because the Internal Revenue Service also looks at whether a [nonprofit] board is representative," which means most will have boards of more than one member.

Mike Abel, a Greensboro lawyer who helped draft the new law, says legislators wanted to bring rules covering nonprofits into line with the state Business Corporation Act, which was revised in 1989.

The new statute also is based on a model nonprofit corporation act developed by a subcommittee of the American Bar Association in 1987.

In addition to annual reports, the

act covers incorporation procedures; members' meetings and voting; standards of conduct for nonprofit directors and officers; and mergers.

The Center for Nonprofits, which has studied the new measure, has concluded that it provides as much liability protection for nonprofit boards and officers as do current regulations, Takahashi says.

And because the newly required annual reports most likely will be mailed by the state to organizations registered as nonprofits, the center does not anticipate many problems with nonprofits failing to file.

For information on the new regulations, call the NC Center for Nonprofits at (919) 571-0811.

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