

NORTHWESTERN LEGAL SERVICES

*Renaissance Centre
1001 State Street, Suite 1200
Erie, Pennsylvania 16501-1833*

(814) 452-6949 Ext. 123
Toll Free (800) 753-5704

www.nwls.org
Fax: (814) 452-3734

Robert A. Oakley, Executive Director

Raymond H. Bogaty, Jr., Board President

Nomination of Ms. Thelma Grady Erie County Bar Association Liberty Bell Award

I would like to nominate Ms. Thelma Grady for the Erie County Bar Association's 2005 Liberty Bell Award. She is an everyday citizen who has demonstrated extraordinary community service in a voluntary capacity that has strengthened our system of freedom under law.

Thelma Grady is a disabled African-American, divorced, single mother of six children currently living in Erie. Her story began in Laurel, Mississippi, where Thelma was born and raised. It was there that she experienced firsthand the profound effects of racial segregation and the terror of racial unrest. Her decision to leave her birthplace in search of a safe haven to raise her family was the reason she moved to Erie more than 40 years ago. It also launched her lifelong commitment to make her new home a better place for all of its residents, regardless of their ethnic background or socio-economic status.

Ms. Grady was instrumental in starting the Crime Watch Program locally, a tool to help reduce crime in public housing projects in the city of Erie. Her organizational efforts on behalf of her neighbors included her work as co-founder of the Tenant Council in the Harbor Homes Public Housing, a movement to give tenants a greater voice in their public housing community. The Department of Housing and Urban Development recognized her efforts and awarded the Tenant Council a grant to organize tenant councils in all of the other public housing projects in the city and county of Erie. The Tenant Councils work with the public housing administration to advise them on priorities for service delivery improvements, business rules, and the ways that the administration can improve and strengthen communication with tenants.

Thelma's firm belief that the education and involvement of tenants regarding their rights and responsibilities in public housing makes for better housing and better tenants was instrumental in her selection as a "Hero of Public Housing" by the Housing Authority of the City of Erie in 2003. Her work on behalf of the tenant council in Harbor Homes, moreover, proved to be very farsighted. Today the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development mandates that resident advisory councils be created in all public housing projects.

Ms. Grady was also very active in the local office of the NAACP. Additionally, she was co-founder of the local Welfare Rights Organization, a grass-roots committee that advocated on behalf

Serving Cameron, Crawford, Elk, Erie, Forest, McKean, Mercer, Potter, Venango, Warren Counties

 LSC

of welfare recipients to demand income, clothing, food, and justice for their families. This organization, with chapters nationwide, took the lead in challenging the stereotypes and the stigma associated with being a welfare recipient, and it lobbied for increased benefits and educational opportunities for low-income individuals and families.

The idea that justice is a fundamental right for all of our citizens motivated Ms. Grady to join Northwestern Legal Services in 1975 as a client-eligible board member. For 30 years, she has remained a tireless advocate for civil legal aid for poor members of our community and an important voice on the Northwestern Legal Services' board. She was the founder and president of the Clients' Council of Erie County for many years, an advisory group to legal services that addresses client needs, and recommends how limited resources can best be used on their behalf. When the statewide Clients' Council of Pennsylvania was organized, Ms. Grady became an active member of that organization, and she continues to serve in that capacity today.

As a client board member on the Northwestern Legal Services board of directors, Ms. Grady became deeply involved in the training of client-eligible board members. Her efforts were invaluable in advising new client board members in their responsibilities as a member of the board and the need for each member to be a spokesperson for their local community. When massive cuts in the federal budget threatened the very existence of legal aid in the early 1980s, Ms. Grady and other members of the Clients' Council traveled to Washington to march on behalf of retaining legal services nationwide and to ensure continued access to justice for the underprivileged in our country.

Another example of Thelma's advocacy on behalf of legal aid clients was evidenced in her participation in the mid-1980s in an action called "Project Vote." In her leadership role with the Client's Council of Erie County, Thelma joined with Northwestern Legal Services and other non-profit agencies to bring civil litigation that resulted in voter registration materials being made available to low-income individuals at county assistance offices and at unemployment compensation departments across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

When President Clinton signed legislation overhauling part of the nation's welfare system, replacing the social program known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with a new program called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), the Erie Clients' Council, under the guidance of Northwestern Legal Services and Ms. Grady, held several workshops throughout the City and County of Erie to inform welfare recipients of the changes in the law. Educating the community was crucial to ensure that recipients understood how these changes would impact their lives and what would be expected of them under the new legislation. Thelma, along with other client council members, stepped up to the plate and worked long hours to get the word out to recipients about these important developments.

Thelma has served on local, state and national committees devoted to the furtherance of civil legal aid, and she continues to offer guidance and support for these efforts. Her depth of commitment is a unique quality that makes her stand out among the many friends within the legal services community. As a testament to her ongoing commitment to the mission of legal aid, Thelma was honored by Pennsylvania Legal Services with its "Striving Toward Excellence" Award in 2002.

Ms. Grady was a past member of the Pennsylvania Legal Services Board of Directors where

she served on the Personnel and Affirmative Action Committee and is a member of the National Legal Aid and Defender Association Board where she has served on the Executive Committee. She is on the Boards of the Martin Luther King Center and the John F. Kennedy Center. She is also a member of the Pennsylvania Legal Services Housing Task Force, the Income Maintenance Advisory Council of the Department of Public Welfare, and the Medicaid Advisory Council.

Thelma Grady is an ordinary citizen who has demonstrated extraordinary community service that has strengthened our system of freedom under law. She has brought enormous energy and commitment to making our home a better place to live for all of its residents. For this, I believe she is deserving of the Liberty Bell Award from the Erie County Bar Association.