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Golden Opportunities

AFTER A 45-YEAR, HIGH-powered corporate law career, isn't it time to relax? Not if you're Warren Sinsheimer. Instead of kicking back, he's shifted into a higher gear.

Last December, Sinsheimer, 73, opened the doors to Legal Services for Children, Inc., a full-service law firm in New York he founded to serve young, low-income clients free of charge. The firm represents individuals under 18 years old in any civil legal matter. About 50 percent of the cases are education-related, and a few are class actions.

Sinsheimer, who looks more like a healthy 60, is no stranger to public service. He and his wife established a scholarship in 1992 at New York University School of Law and pay the tuition and a summer stipend for three students a year, on the condition that the students spend three years after graduation providing civil legal services to low-income people. Nor is he a stranger to children's law. In January 1996, just five days after retiring from New York's Patterson, Belknap, Webb & Tyler, where he had been a corporate partner specializing in mergers and acquisitions work for ten years, Sinsheimer started work as a full-time volunteer at Westchester/Putnam Legal Services in White Plains, New York.

He had received a letter from Westchester/Putnam asking lawyers to donate an amount equal to their hourly rate; the letter also mentioned that some lawyers had agreed to donate a few hours of their time. Sinsheimer asked his wife, "If we have the scholarship and tell these kids they should do public interest work, why shouldn't I do it?"

After diving in headfirst into education law, because that was where his skills were needed, he soon surfaced as a specialist, handling most of Westchester/Putnam's education cases for the next three years. The majority of these cases revolved around the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which requires all states to provide a free, appropriate public education to all children who are disabled in any way. Sinsheimer, who received no formal training,



WARREN SINSHIMER

says he learned the old-fashioned way: "I asked people how to do things."

Ironically, it was legislation passed by the Republican-controlled Congress that caused Sinsheimer—a Republican himself—to decide to start his own firm. The Budget Act of 1996 slashed legal services funding and barred all legal aid lawyers receiving federal funding—including those at Westchester/Putnam—from handling class action suits aimed at systemic reform and from representing prisoners or illegal aliens. Sinsheimer was appalled. "You can't practice law that way," he thought, and the idea to form a privately funded firm to advocate for children was born.

"People are surprised Republicans do this type of work," he notes.

But Sinsheimer doesn't just "do" public service work. He is a leader in the field. The 1950 New York Law School graduate, who has won two pro bono awards since retirement, spent over a year obtaining financing for Legal Services for Children from foundations and private law firms in New York City. Now Sinsheimer works full-time at Legal Services

for Children, serving, he likes to joke, as the firm's "president, secretary, and paralegal." Along with a paid staff of three lawyers and one social worker, the firm's clients are served by nine volunteer lawyers—a combination of retirees and women who have come back to work after raising families.

Sinsheimer specifically targeted both of these groups in his proposal, and was aware of the specific concerns retired volunteers might have: "Most people, when they retire, especially those who have been partners at large firms, are fearful of starting something new." To combat these feelings of intimidation, Sinsheimer's philosophy is that if a retiree focuses on one specific area of law, he can learn to master it.

To recruit more volunteers, Sinsheimer plans to write to large firms in the city to ask if he can speak to senior partners close to retirement age. "The idea of what to do after retirement is a seed that needs to be planted," he says. "Most of my colleagues haven't thought about what it will be like to suddenly have nothing to do."

With three to four new cases coming in each day, the staff at Legal Services for Children has plenty of work. Sinsheimer only expects business to grow. "It's not hard to get clients if you're doing the work for nothing," he says in good spirit.

Sinsheimer, who practiced law with his father for 25 years and was a partner at New York's Satterlee & Stevens before joining Patterson, Belknap in 1985, says his work today—with poor people as opposed to CEOs from large companies—is nothing like what he did during his first career. He also feels it's more rewarding.

One of his present clients is a learning-disabled sixth grader who was placed unattended in a kindergarten class for four months after his special education teacher had left the school.

"We are going to go in there and tear that school district apart!" bellows Sinsheimer. "That will give me more satisfaction than putting together any \$10 billion deal ever did."

—Amy Fantini