

Attorney serves seniors

By DEBRA ALEXANDER

Are senior citizens really the forgotten people in today's culture? One Romeo resident, Dale Winnie, proves regularly that he hasn't forgotten.

Winnie, an attorney, provides free legal counseling for senior citizens in seven area communities.

Winnie serves approximately 700 elderly folks at senior citizens' centers in the Rochester, Troy, Royal Oak, Farmington, Hazel Park, Holly and Oxford-Orion areas, holding aid sessions once each month.

In a two-day period, he answers questions on various legal matters, from traffic violations to divorces. During a three-hour visit to a senior center, Winnie is likely to see from 10 to 20 people.

Appointments are scheduled through the various senior centers; if there is time, Winnie will see as many people as possible.

Aside from the approximately 20 hours a month he spends helping the elderly, Winnie maintains a private law practice in Romeo. Before starting this office, he was a corporate attorney for General Motors.

"When you enjoy helping these people like I do, time really isn't important. It goes quickly because I enjoy what I do," says Winnie, who has maintained this routine for nearly two years.

HE ORIGINALLY BECAME involved with senior citizens when he helped organize the Oakland County Senior Citizens' Program.

"I told some of the judges involved with the idea they'd probably get some kid to head it (the program) who was more concerned with pounding the table than pounding the sidewalk," said Winnie.

Seeing someone who was concerned, the judges asked Winnie to head the legal aid service in Oakland County.

The ongoing service provides legal aid for senior citizens in the county, but Winnie found many obstacles in the service.

"The program was great for those who couldn't afford legal counseling



Dale Winnie: "I'm repaying God for what I've had out of life. I enjoy these older people. They're very cordial, courteous and appreciative." (Staff photo by Mindy Saunders)

otherwise. Many seniors are on fixed incomes. Yet, they can afford to pay and resent being given something for nothing," he said.

Therefore, legal fees were not the major consideration. Most senior citizens simply did not know where to go or who to trust with their legal problems, according to Winnie.

"There was also a transportation problem. Legal aid offices were in Pontiac and Ferndale. Because of the congestion, traffic and other concerns about the areas, older people hesitated to use these offices," Winnie said.

IF SENIOR CITIZENS couldn't get to the legal service he provided, he'd bring the service to them, he decided.

"One advantage I have is that I don't have county restrictions. If there's a person in another county that needs my service, I'm free to cross all the red-tape boundaries," Winnie explained.

Before this, the county residence determined the legal aid office the aid service client went to.

Aside from his regular senior center visits, Winnie speaks to large senior groups on many subjects of legal concern. He would like to get some sort of state or federal funds to print material for these senior citizens.

"It is so much easier to explain something if the person can see it in writing. A lot of times the person will forget what I said to do in a particular situation. If they had the printed sheet in front of them, it would be easier for them," said Winnie.

Spanning county boundaries, Winnie also counsels senior citizens in the Tri-County Deaf organization. Serving Oakland, Macomb, and Wayne counties, he communicates to the deaf through his own rough sign language and an interpreter.

"I tell them I love you in my own sign language. Through this, they know I'm trying to reach them and that I care," he added.

"In my own way, I'm repaying God for what I've had out of life. I enjoy these older people. They're very cordial, courteous and appreciative," said Winnie.

"These are the people that helped me get started in the beginning. Now it's my turn to repay them," he added.

For any legal matters he handles, other than advising, Winnie asks his "clients" what the payment should be.

"Sometimes people say \$5 or \$10, other times it's more. It's really up to them," he said.

To show their appreciation for the service Winnie provides, Oakland County judges refer young offenders to him as a court-appointed attorney.

"It's a strange parallel. The money I get helping the young offsets the money I don't receive helping older people," said Winnie.

Explaining his satisfaction with the service, Winnie recalled a recent visit to the Rochester Community House senior center.

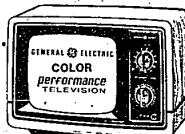
"It was late in the day. The very last person into my office explained why she had waited so long. A friend of hers had told her to wait as long as necessary for me to see her because I would help. Things like that make this all worthwhile," said Winnie, beaming with pride.

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