Winsted Community Advocate Demystifies the Legal Process

BY ROSEMARY P. McNICHOLAS

Winsted, Conn., population 11,000, is every bit the picture of a quiet Litchfield County town. Built around a mill that long ago fell silent, Winsted is now dominated by a red brick town hall, a clover-like green and the small stores dotting Main Street. Rose Sullivan's Shoppe (for fine lingerie), The Winsted Bootery and Billy Ray's Bar.

But don't be fooled by the sleepy exterior: Winsted, the birthplace of consumer and citizens-rights activist Ralph Nader, is home to one of the more powerful institutions to come down the pike—The Office of the Community Lawyer, a post currently held by Charlene LaVoie. The office's work has had an impact beyond the town line, with other communities clamoring for advice, and state legislators taking note of the town's progressive stance on low-level radioactive waste disposal and other environmental issues.



Dc. Nader

'The [community lawyer] position has become almost indistinguishable from an elected office,' gripes Winsted Mayor William McCabe. 'It attempts to control policy.'

Since its establishment in January 1989 by Nader and his sister, Claire Nader, in memory of their late brother, Shafeek, a tireless community organizer, the Winsted Community Lawyer/Advocate Project has provided residents with a *pro bono* advocate to address issues of communitywide concern.

Determining just what constitutes communitywide concern, however, has caused some controversy in Winsted. At its root, the concept of the community lawyer is a slippery one: The post is intended to serve the public interest, but is endowed by a private fund with an activist agenda, the $1.6 million Shafeek Nader Trust For The Community Interest.

"I think the toughest job of a 'community lawyer' funded by a private group is deciding what is in the community's interest," says Mark Svonkin, partner in Hartford's Harding & Svonkin, a former Winsted town attorney who had his share of battles with LaVoie.

"What standards do you apply in making the decision on whether to intervene? How do you know that you are speaking for the whole community, not just another private interest?" he asks.

Svonkin suspects that unless the position is publicly funded, the Office of The Community Lawyer will take its cues from the source of its funds.

Demystifying the Process

The Naders agree. That is why, in the 1989 report they commissioned before beginning the project, they concluded that communities should pool resources to hire a community lawyer. "For now, it's an experiment," says LaVoie. "It's not meant to be funded this way forever."

The theory driving the Naders' project is that participatory democracy has devolved into an "efficiency" model of governing, populated by career politicians and so-called experts versed in the esoteric language of the law. Concurrently, the issues of the day have grown more complex, and civics classes, once mandatory in the nation's public schools, have all but been eliminated, making it more difficult for most citizens to understand the workings of government.

As a result, the Naders believe, government involvement by the plain folks who are supposed to be running this democracy has declined. Less citizen involvement means less government accountability, which in turn devolves into the sad spectacle of a disenfranchised electorate clamoring for accountability, and a government complaining about the apathy of the citizenry.

The Naders' solution: Give the people a community lawyer, an advocate and educator who can help them understand