their rights and responsibilities as citizens, who can straighten out the dizzying web of laws and regulations and cut through the mysterious rituals of town rule to put government back in their hands.

"My role is to demystify the legal process or the charter process so citizens can understand their rights, feel some sort of empowerment and have some stake in the process," says LaVoie, who has been Winsted's community lawyer since June 1990, when the position was vacated by Ellen Thomas, a public-interest lawyer from Indiana. Pre-law students from Northwestern Connecticut Community College, on the edge of town, and a full-time intern also assist in the office.

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.

"You want to develop a capability for people to initiate and anticipate, not just respond," says Claire Nader, director of the Shafeek Nader Trust For The Community Interest. "Then the people set the agenda, they are not just responding to an agenda set by experts or elected officials."

A tall order, perhaps, but in its more than three years in existence, the Community Lawyer Project has taken major leaps in fulfilling that mandate. It has helped the citizens of Winsted to: enact a ban on foam packaging containing chlorofluorocarbons, or CFCs; enact a resolution banning the disposal of low-level radioactive waste within the town; make cable operators comply with state mandates to provide public-access television and facilities to the town; and help a local political candidate preserve his right to be a write-in candidate on the state's congressional ballot.

Through LaVoie's pamphlets and workshops, dozens of residents have learned about the workings of the town charter for the first time, with special attention paid to the budgetary process.

But critics of the project, echoing Svonkin, charge that the community lawyer's role, which LaVoie defines as "watchdog, ombudsman, facilitator, initiator, educator and advocate," has become politicized, with the watchdog function eclipsing more neutral, civic functions.

"Originally, I had no problem" with the project, says Winsted Mayor William McCabe, who has clashed with LaVoie on several occasions, most notably when LaVoie challenged the Board of Selectmen's right to fire the town manager. "But I have seen a turn toward a very partisan and political office."

LaVoie contends that she is motivated by adherence to procedure, not politics.

"I have worked cohesively with the town government on many different things," she says. But, she adds, "when you break the rules, I am going to say something about it."

Fledgling Activists

That view is vintage LaVoie, who left a civil-rights practice in William Laviano's Ridgefield firm to assume the community lawyer position in June 1990 and has served on the board of the Connecticut Civil Liberties Union since 1987.

She brings an obvious zeal to her work, attending nearly every town meeting, organizing petition drives, meeting with concerned citizens in her office in a restored but now-silent mill.

When asked why LaVoie was selected for the position, Claire Nader responds succinctly. "She wasn't looking for a job. She was looking for a mission."

As such, LaVoie can be downright aggressive in reaching her goals. She radiates a controlled energy, speaking with the conviction of someone who knows she is right. Yet she is reluctant to speak for the record about her background, her personal life, or even her age, preferring to shift the focus to her work as the community lawyer, a role she says she assumes seven days a week.

"I'm pretty much *on* all the time—and I don't mind," she says. On a stroll down to the local movie theater it is not

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