

[<< back to story >>](#)

Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram

Legal donations

Several local lawyers offer free assistance in developing nations.

July 18, 2007



The Associated Press

Linda McGill is one of five Maine lawyers who have volunteered for the International Senior Lawyers Project. She worked for six months in New Delhi, India, in 2003 and has returned twice for shorter volunteer stints.

— By JOSIE HUANG

Staff Writer

Where they live outside New Delhi, an impoverished class of people once known as the "untouchables" are used to sweeping streets and cleaning latrines, jobs no one else will take.

But when the Dalits' huts were torched by higher-caste villagers, Portland lawyer Linda McGill watched centuries of submission nearly spill over into violence.

"Some of the people were wanting to take up arms," McGill said of an April meeting Dalits had with legal advocates. "Others were wanting to go to the legal route."

McGill said legal recourse prevailed, thanks to the work of human rights lawyers she assists through the International Senior Lawyers Project.

The New York-based program pairs seasoned lawyers such as McGill, a lawyer at Bernstein Shur, with advocacy groups in parts of the world where the poor, and women and children have nowhere to turn for legal help.

McGill spent half a year in New Delhi in 2003 and has returned twice for shorter periods. In between visits, she provides research and counsel.

McGill has started a mini-tradition of sorts in Maine. Four other lawyers have served as long-term volunteers with the program.

Her colleague at Bernstein Shur, Joe Hahn, just returned from South Africa, where he worked for Civil Society Watch, a program that identifies and responds to threats against people's right to organize and speak out around the world.

Richard Spencer of Drummond Woodsum & MacMahon volunteered on the first case ever won against a mining company in Mongolia. And retired husband-wife team Bill Coogan and Kim Matthews assisted a prominent Kenyan human rights lawyer.

Executive director Jane Berman said the Maine lawyers represent the largest percentage of long-term volunteers from any state. That may be, she said, because word of mouth spreads easily in Maine's small lawyer community.

Berman also speculated that "people who live in Maine are adventuresome and maybe somewhat more willing to rough it than people living in larger urban areas."

Volunteers, some of them partners in their law firms, need to "hit the ground running" in a foreign country, said the program's volunteer and outreach coordinator Andra Moss.

That's why their experience -- typically between 25 to 30 years -- is so crucial.

"They can usually just pull out these bits of knowledge to be able to help the organization," Moss said.

McGill may have more than 25 years working in employment law, but as she looked to volunteer abroad during her sabbatical, she thought she would have to put her professional skills on the shelf.

"Representing people requires admissions and licenses," said McGill, who considered volunteering at an orphanage instead. "Also, I thought the prospect of learning another country's laws was daunting."

Then McGill learned about the senior lawyers project through Internet research. Recognizing her desire to work in India, the project matched McGill with the Human Rights Law Network.

As it turns out, McGill could do much of her work without an interpreter. The Indian legal system is partly based in part on English common law, like many developing countries, and the educated professionals in India speak fluent English.

Over the years, she has worked on cases involving damages for families of disappeared persons and the rights of a girl whose parents had committed her to a life of Hindu renunciation, which involves living in poverty, apart from family and friends. McGill said her work in India couldn't be more different from representing Maine employers and municipalities in cases of employment discrimination and union negotiations. But the experience reinforces for her why she became a lawyer in the first place.

"Lawyers are agents of change, whether if it's for a non-profit in India, or a business or town in Maine," McGill said.

Staff Writer Josie Huang can be contacted at 791-6364 or at:

jhuang@pressherald.com

Copyright © 2007 Blethen Maine Newspapers

[<< back to story >>](#)