

Pro Bono Publico: Why History Matters—A Life



By William H. Clendenen, Jr.

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Last spring, the Connecticut Bar Foundation, as part of its tribute to Judge Ray Norko, funded the Connecticut Legal Aid History Project with a grant of \$5,000. The purpose of the project is to preserve as well as to educate the public about the history of legal aid in Connecticut.¹ Spearheading the project are Norm Janes, long-time legal aid lawyer and former Connecticut Bar Association president and Dwight Merriam of Robinson & Cole LLP, chair of the Connecticut Bar Foundation Fellows Education and Program Committee. While the project is focused on the stories of the legal aid lawyers, it is the clients who had the largest stake in the story.

All of this was brought home to me on July 31, 2013, when I learned that Matilda “Tillie” Gibbs died on July 23, 2013 at age 76. Tillie, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was the president of the New Haven Welfare MOMS (Mothers on the March). Tillie and the MOMS were dedicated to securing economic justice for Connecticut’s most vulnerable women and children supported by the Aid to Families with Dependent Children Program (AFDC).

In 1970, Governor Thomas Meskill was elected, in part, to revamp Connecticut’s welfare system.² The governor and his appointees decided to cut drastically AFDC by instituting a flat grant program, which treated families as statistics instead of people with actual, individual needs. Tillie and the MOMS, with the help of lawyers from New Haven Legal Assistance, took up the fight to stop the welfare cuts. Tillie organized sleep-ins on the New Haven Green and occupations of federal buildings in Boston and Washington, DC.

Tillie next created a coalition of other AFDC mothers from around the state, with the help of the New Haven Legal Assistance lawyers and lawyers from the predecessors to Connecticut Legal Services. They organized a takeover of the state capitol, trapping Governor Meskill and Lieutenant Governor T. Clark

Hull³ in the building. After extended negotiations with the Connecticut State Police, Tillie and the other mothers pitched their tents on the Great Lawn in front of the state capitol.⁴ These efforts led to changes and improvements in the grants to the AFDC families, but the majority of the cuts were implemented.

Subsequently, Tillie and a number of the other AFDC mothers took the skills they had learned in this struggle and enrolled in college. After graduating college, Tillie worked as the assistant director of the South Central Connecticut Elderly Nutrition Project and Community Action Agency’s Meals on Wheels. Tillie spent her entire life helping the disadvantaged. Hers was a life well lived. She was a hero to me.

Many other AFDC mothers, with the help of Connecticut’s legal aid lawyers, succeeded similarly, as did their children. Some of the children became lawyers, business executives, schoolteachers, gainfully employed heads of their own families, and even a judge. We need to remember and understand the history of legal aid in Connecticut because it will continue to remind us of both the great struggles confronted and the successes possible when we lawyers all work together with our disadvantaged clients for the public good. **CL**

Notes

1. Please see the August/September 2013 “Time to Go Pro Bono” column in the *Connecticut Lawyer* for additional information about Judge Norko.
2. Governor Meskill later became an outstanding, empathetic and widely admired federal judge.
3. Lt. Governor Hull also became a widely admired justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court.
4. Some of the litigation from this period is found in *Johnson v. White*, 353 F.Supp. 69 (D. Conn 1972), aff’d in part, rev. in part 528 F.2d 1228 (2nd Cir. 1975).