

2024 Robert M. Spire Public Service Award Recipients:

When asked how many clients they estimate they've had over their combined 48 years of service at Legal Aid of Nebraska, Jennifer Gaughan and Muirne Heaney have trouble even estimating a number. After taking a few moments to think on it, they agree on a total: a lot.

Jennifer is celebrating her 25th year with Legal Aid of Nebraska in 2024, and Muirne is in her 23rd year with the firm. Jennifer serves as Chief of Legal and Strategy, having served previously as managing attorney of the North Platte and Lincoln offices, Director of Litigation and Advocacy, and a brief stint as interim Executive Director. Muirne serves as Managing Attorney, overseeing the 4 walk-in Self-Help Centers around the state and the client intake system. Based on their tireless dedication to the work of Legal Aid of Nebraska, the OBA Public Service Committee chose Jennifer and Muirne as our 2024 Robert M. Spire Public Service Award recipients. Legal Aid of Nebraska as an entire law firm received the same honor in 2014. The Award's namesake, local attorney Bob Spire, served as President of the Legal Aid Society of Omaha's Board in the 1970s, and practiced in the same law firm as Legal Aid founder Al Ellick.

The Spire Public Service Award was initiated at the 1986 Law Day, and is presented to an attorney or attorney organization each year. The criteria under consideration for the award includes: (1) The public's knowledge of the law or the legal system has been enhanced in some significant way by the recipient's efforts; (2) The recipient has focused on providing service to the community for purposes other than pecuniary profits; and (3) The recipient has demonstrated long term commitment to the

enhancement of the public's knowledge of the law.

Born and raised in Omaha, Marian "Muirne" Heaney knew she wanted to be an attorney helping kids since her teenage years. After attending law school at Creighton, she clerked for a judge for the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals, and ultimately took a position with the Hennepin County Attorney's Office in Minneapolis, where she worked for more than 11 years. Muirne returned to Omaha in 2000, taking a position with Legal Aid in Omaha, where she has been ever since.



Muirne Heaney

In those early days of her Legal Aid work, Muirne described the office's work as dominated by a contract they had with Douglas County to provide legal counsel (primarily as guardians ad litem) for juvenile court cases. A few years into her career at Legal Aid, that contract was ended, and the office was able to rebalance its practice areas into "traditional Legal Aid practice areas" – the four main areas of focus today: (1) Children and Families, (2) Debt and Finance, (3) Housing, and (4) Income and Benefits.

Muirne has a clear passion for her work and the mission of Legal Aid that is evident when you talk to her. She especially enjoys working with people who come to the office who want to help themselves as Self-Represented Litigants, but who need some assistance in navigating the legal system and filling out the proper paperwork for their legal filings. One of Muirne's favorite clinics helps rehabilitated fathers who have never had custody or visitation of their children to file for modification of that schedule, to help them gain relationships with their children. Says Muirne, "It's rewarding to have clients come back, years later, and tell us how we helped them."

Jennifer Gaughan & Muirne Heaney

Unlike Muirne, Jennifer Gaughan didn't make the decision to become a lawyer until well into her undergraduate studies as a psychology major. Admittedly, her father being an attorney probably had some influence on her decision to in the end take the LSAT and apply to law school. As a law student at the University of Nebraska College of Law, Jennifer clerked for Legal Aid's Lincoln office, and was hooked: this was the place for her. After law school, Jennifer worked in the Lincoln office for a year, and then transferred out to the North Platte Office. Jennifer's husband, Kevin Gaughan, an attorney at FNBO, had taken a job in North Platte and they ended up being in North Platte for 6 years. On her time in the North Platte office, Jennifer smiled and said, "I had a lot of times where I was the only attorney in that office, so I had a quick immersion into all of the things we did as a firm."

Jennifer's position as Chief of Legal & Strategy has her working with all Legal Aid directors on their services and case work, and to also help strategize on any appellate work the firm might be pursuing. In 2023, a case that Legal Aid of Nebraska had worked on went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, with the Court ultimately finding equity theft unconstitutional (See *Tyler v. Hennepin County*). Legal Aid of Nebraska's size and scope is itself very impressive: statewide, they receive approximately 19,000 requests for civil legal assistance to low-income Nebraskans a year, provide legal assistance on more than 14,000 cases a year, has a 50 attorneys and 90 total staff. 300,000 people in Nebraska financially qualify for Legal Aid's services, and so the need for their work is great in our communities.

Out of the 14,000 cases a year that Legal Aid helps on, 50% of those requests are in the area of children and families, a lot of that work being Domestic

Relations. In addition to standard Domestic Relations help, Legal Aid also provides assistance to victims of Domestic Violence. 20% of Legal Aid requests are related to housing assistance, mostly with evictions. 20% of requests are in the Income and Benefits area, including disability benefits, unemployment insurance benefits, Medicaid, and SNAP. 10% of requests relate to Debt & Finance, most notably debt collection and bankruptcy.

When asked what she finds most rewarding about her job, Jennifer talks about the resiliency of her clients, "Their determination and dedication is inspiring, and is motivating to help them pursue justice in their legal matters. I don't feel like my job is a job; I love the work that we do. I've totally bought into the mission of Legal Aid."



Jennifer Gaughan

Asked how private attorneys can help Legal Aid, both Jennifer and Muirne mentioned the private placement program they have for pro bono cases for attorneys, and also the Self-Help clinics that happen on the weekends during the year, such as their set-aside clinic and transfer on death deed clinic. If you have even just a few hours to spare, Legal Aid would love your help.

What the future hold for these two? Muirne shared the news that she will be retiring from Legal Aid at the end of the year. Said Jennifer, "I hope to continue to make Legal Aid better and better as we go along. We're strong already, but there's always room for improvement."