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Lawyer Verges on Sainly in Defense of Los Angeles' Neediest

The landlord turned a single-family house into more than 40 rental rooms, raising questions about how the project passed inspections and received permits.

By Susan Vaughn

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Few lawyers get compared to saints, particularly by their peers. But Nancy Mintie is an exceptional attorney. Her office is in Skid Row, and her clients are Los Angeles' most disenfranchised souls: its poorest immigrants, its homeless, its mentally ill.

Mintie is founding director of the Inner City Law Clinic. With six other public interest attorneys, she renders legal help to those who need it most but can afford it least. Her organization's operating budget is \$600,000, culled from private donations, foundation awards, government grants and contingency fee earnings. And after 21 years of practicing law—and not losing a single case—Mintie allows herself an annual salary of \$42,000.

"She has this saint like aura," said UCLA law professor Alison Grey Anderson, who has known Mintie for more than two decades.

"The woman is a saint," echoes attorney Sharon Lybeck Hartmann, an attorney who worked with Mintie on several cases. "But so often we think of saints as

accepting what they find. She's not like that. She's really a tough fighter."

Fighting for Mintie comes in the form of legal briefs. Her nemeses are the city's worst slumlords.

For the last two decades, Mintie, 46, has been wandering the streets of Skid Row and other poor areas in Los Angeles County, photographing squalid tenements as deplorable as those encountered by Jacob Riis, a social reformer and photographer who documented New York City's slums in the 1890s and early 1900s.

She takes inventory of the collapsed roofs, broken pipes spewing raw sewage, urine-fetid hallways, and unlit and unventilated closets that some landlords have rented as apartments. She sees children covered with rat bites, and others who have cockroaches embedded in their ears. And she does what she can.

After getting inspection reports about such slums and gathering expert statements about the physical and mental toll those conditions take, she appeals to the courts for succor. It may come in the form of emergency repairs, financial compensation for injuries, and other damages.

On occasion, Mintie, who frequently teams up with private law firms, has won multimillion-dollar awards for her clients. Some of the plaintiffs have used the money to buy homes for their families. Others have set aside funds to send their children to college.

This is what brings Mintie the greatest joy.

"When they go to college, they can get jobs; help their parents, brothers and sisters; and then the cycle of poverty is broken," she said. Mintie originally aspired to be a music teacher, but midway through Loyola Marymount University, she had a change of heart.

"I can attribute that to feminism," she said. "I grew up at a time when many girls felt their options were limited."

College allowed her to explore careers other than the ones she'd perceived as her only choices: housewife or teacher. She found her calling—helping the poor—and enrolled at UCLA Law School.

"I realized I might be able to do something about those problems," she said.

While in law school, she participated in externships and public interest clinics, gaining experience in advocacy. She graduated in 1979 and immediately contacted the Los Angeles Catholic Worker in Skid Row about employment. While living in a shelter in Boyle Heights, she served in the Catholic Worker's soup kitchen during her mornings, then spent afternoons in its garage, her "office," offering legal advice to Los Angeles' poor.

She helped some get benefits, recover unpaid wages, battle illegal evictions and find shelter. For mentally ill individuals, she sought care. She helped others get

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into job programs.

But many of the slumlords whom she took on hired the city's top law firms to represent them. Mintie quickly realized that, to be effective against such legal heavyweights, she'd need help. She partnered with established private law firms, began fundraising, spent hours in the law library, sat in on court cases and asked more experienced attorneys for advice.

"Nancy has the most acute sense of injustice—combined with the tenaciousness and character to do something about the injustice—of anyone I've ever met," said Gary Blasi, a UCLA law professor who's known her 22 years.

He recalled visiting Mintie's garage-office on sweltering summer days. Despite the 100-degree heat, he said, Mintie kept working. On her desk were large rats—one more than a foot long—suspended in formaldehyde. She'd collected the vermin from the tenements of her clients, then would bring the "exhibits" to court to show jurors and judges.

"You can't explain to these regular folks and city counselors what it's like living in a slum," Blasi said. "But they understand rat bites on a kid."

While at Catholic Worker, Mintie met her husband to be, Ardon Alger, a fellow volunteer who now teaches photography. For their first date, they photographed a tenement basement to prepare for a case.

Mintie has had her share of close calls while working on Skid Row. A mentally ill woman once tried to toss a pot of hot coffee at her. "I ducked," she said. An

unstable, agitated, homeless man, carrying a blade that was nearly a foot long, threatened her. But Mintie takes the risks in stride.

"My guardian angel has been working overtime for me," she said.

The second of seven children, Mintie was reared Roman Catholic and takes her religious faith seriously. It is a motivation behind her 21-year career on Los Angeles' meanest streets.

In the mid-1980s, Mintie realized that, to be more effective, she'd have to markedly increase her funding and resources. She could do so by petitioning for state and federal support, but this would mean she'd have to sever ties with Catholic Worker, which had a policy of refusing government money.

She publicized her intentions and, in 1985, a group of rock musicians—including the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson, Fleetwood Mac's Christine McVie and the Bangles—put on a benefit for Mintie's Inner City Law Clinic. The money they raised allowed her to establish a storefront office on San Pedro Street, between 5th and 6th.

A few years ago, she moved to her present location at 7th and Central, where her clinic aids more than 3,000 clients annually.

In September, Mintie helped win a multimillion-dollar settlement for 57 tenants at an Alvarado Terrace apartment. The building's owner had leased a dank basement space to a mentally disabled couple. A child at the site had died of pneumonia.

Currently, she and two private law firms are representing the 64 adults and 38 children who lived in the 24-unit Echo Park building that collapsed Dec. 8, killing one person and injuring lived in the 24-unit Echo Park building that collapsed Dec. 8, killing one person and injuring 36. The building had been cited for a damaged foundation in 1998.

Most of Mintie's slum cases today are in the Pico Union and South Central areas, she said. Over the last 10 years, nonprofit organizations have purchased and renovated downtown Los Angeles' most dilapidated hotels, markedly improving their conditions.

Mintie played a hand in this, too, for in her early years of lawyering, she sued the county to improve its single-occupancy hotel residences.

"The result was really sweeping," said attorney Hartmann, who has known Mintie for years.

But so many causes still compete for her attention. More than 150,000 rental units in Los Angeles County are in substandard condition. The number of county tenants living in poverty has doubled in the last 10 years.

Mounting law school fees are forcing prospective public interest attorneys to reconsider their chosen career. Mintie is greatly distressed by this development. She has come up with a way to help law students—and healthcare workers—relieve their educational debt burdens if they wish to devote their careers to serving impoverished people.



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Last year, Mintie launched Uncommon Good, a nonprofit organization whose goal is to raise funds, at first from faith-based organizations, to offset graduates' school debts, "so they can serve the poor fulltime."

"There's a huge need for it," she said. "I'm getting calls from all over the country."

Mintie has big plans for Uncommon Good and has enlisted others to further its mission. Robert Hertzberg, speaker of the California Assembly, has offered to sponsor legislation that would allocate \$10 million to help newly graduated public interest lawyers and healthcare workers, she said. "I hope this would serve as a model for other states to copy," she said. "Because if this issue isn't addressed, we won't have public service as we know it."

Mintie divides her time equally between overseeing litigation at the Inner City Law Clinic and doing fundraising and promotional work for Uncommon Good. From her home in the Pomona Valley, she commutes nearly four hours roundtrip each day to her office. While there, she meets with clients and community members, performs various litigation duties, champions Uncommon Good and occasionally lectures at local law schools.

Karen Lash, associate dean of USC Law School, says as a young law student she heard Mintie speak.

"It left a deep impression on me," Lash said. "She made it very clear that you can't solve all the social problems, you can't change the world or fix the whole problem, but you can make a difference.

You can help people. You can have an impact."

Others have been similarly moved by Mintie's efforts and messages of hope. Many are attempting to follow in her footsteps. For the last 12 years, UCLA Law School has been giving a Nancy Mintie Award to its most outstanding public interest law students.

"What I'm most grateful for is that I've had the opportunity to serve as I have," Mintie said. "As a religious person, I attribute that to the grace of God. It's been a wonderful life so far, a very satisfying life."