



Veterans receive assistance at a Beaumont veterans clinic last November. Photo courtesy of Jefferson County Bar Association.

# TEXAS LAWYERS FOR TEXAS VETERANS

## *Attorney Volunteers Share Their Experiences*

BY JUDY L. MARCHMAN

Two years ago, Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans launched to great enthusiasm and support from individual lawyers, law students, and paralegals to law firms, in-house legal departments, and local bar associations. As veterans legal clinics have been established across the state, partnerships have formed between local bars and legal aid organizations, and with the Texas Veterans Commission and other veterans service organizations, with the common goal of helping to increase the availability of pro bono legal assistance to veterans and their families.

The past two Novembers, local bar associations and legal aid organizations commemorated Veterans Day by holding special veterans legal clinics. For some bars, these clinics are in addition to their regularly scheduled veterans clinics. In November 2011, 16 veterans clinics were held across the state, including all major metropolitan areas as well as in Beaumont, Bell County, Brazoria County, Hidalgo County, Longview, Midland/Big Spring, and Porter. Approximately 400 veterans received some form of free legal assistance from nearly 190 attorney volunteers.

The *Texas Bar Journal* recently spoke with three attorneys who volunteer with the veterans legal clinics in their communities to learn more about their experiences.

**JOHN T. FERGUSON**, BIG SPRING

*Ferguson has practiced law in Big Spring since 1962 and is board certified in probate and estate planning. He volunteers at the veterans legal clinics in Big Spring that are sponsored by Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas, the Midland County Bar Association, Howard County Bar Association, and Midland County Young Lawyers Association. In 2011, four clinics were held in the area — two in Big Spring at the Lamun Lusk Sanchez Texas State Veterans Home and two in Midland, with one at Casa de Amigos and the other at Workforce Solutions of the Permian Basin. For more information about future clinics, contact the Midland office of Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas at (432) 686-0647.*

**How did you get involved in the veterans legal clinic in Big Spring?**

I've been at all three (veterans clinics). Our local bar association let us know about the clinics. Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas did as well. I always try to do pro bono work and have worked for many years with legal aid here. They have referred cases to me from time to time.

**Are you a veteran yourself?**

Technically, I'm a veteran of World War II. I joined the Army in July of 1945 and the war ended in August. I did spend a year in the Army, though, and then went to college and law school on the GI Bill. I was only 22 when I got out of law school and couldn't get a job. I finally went to work for Phillips Petroleum Company and that's how I ended up in West Texas.

**At the veterans clinics, has there been a particular case that stood out to you?**

There was a veteran who was in bad health and who wanted a will. He came in with his wife. He was a younger man, so he possibly served in the Gulf or maybe peacetime. It was a real satisfying experience because the veteran passed away not long after we executed the will. So, it was just in the nick of time. His widow came in with his will and I probated it. But if they hadn't made it to the clinic, I don't know if he would have been able to get a will done elsewhere.

**Why is it important to you to participate in the veterans clinics?**

You don't get paid, but sometimes the compensation in helping others is better than money. We're a service profession, and I believe we have a duty to give back to our community.

**KARIN D. MAYER**, FORT WORTH

*Mayer, a sole family law practitioner, serves on the board of the Tarrant County Family Law Bar Association and on the Tarrant County Bar Association's TLTV Committee. She volunteers with the Tarrant County Bar Association veterans legal clinic, which began in August 2010 and is held monthly at the Fort Worth VA Outpatient Clinic. For more information, visit [txltxv.org](http://txltxv.org).*

**How did you get involved with the Tarrant County Bar Association's veterans legal clinics?**

I got involved as a family lawyer. The Tarrant County Bar contacted the Tarrant County Family Law Bar Association for help at the clinics and to place family law cases. I had just taken a training seminar for veterans clinic volunteers given by the Tarrant County Bar, so the Family Law Bar asked me to help. I know several veterans and some of the difficulties they have had, so this is just a good way to give back.

**You attend the veterans clinic most every month. In addition to providing basic legal advice, what else have you done as part of the clinic?**

I've taken on several cases that have come from one of the clinics, and I help place family law cases with volunteers. If I know the issue at hand, I know which lawyers would be a good match in the Fort Worth area. We have a good number of family law volunteers here, and if someone can't take on a case, they can volunteer to assist other lawyers with a case.

**Is there a particular case from the veterans clinics that stands out to you?**

A case that was most satisfying to me was helping a veteran whose wife had abandoned him and their three children. He was trying to get a divorce but had no way of moving forward because he couldn't find her. I was able to locate her, serve her, and get him a chance to move on with his life.

**What has been the reaction of veterans to the legal clinics?**

Word of mouth among veterans has really helped spread the word, so more know about the clinic and what we're doing. And being at the VA clinic has really helped. It's a very good resource to be there. We get walk-ins who ask about it all the time. You end up talking to a lot of veterans during each clinic. Some are there because they don't know what steps to take next with their problem. Many just need their questions answered. That's all, and they are so grateful. I think I've gotten more out of it than the veterans have. It's so very satisfying to see the change in people just because you answered a question.



**MARJORIE RUTH PERRY, BEAUMONT**

*Perry is a sole practitioner with a focus on probate, guardianship, and elder law, who volunteers for the Jefferson County Bar Association's veterans legal clinics. The Jefferson County Bar held veterans clinics in November 2010 and 2011, and as part of the Veterans Legal Initiative, a coalition serving 14 counties in southeast Texas, the bar now holds or sponsors legal clinics and seminars on a regular basis. For more information, visit [jcba.org](http://jcba.org).*

**How did you get involved with the Jefferson County Bar Association's veterans legal clinics?**

I joined the Jefferson County Bar in June of 2010, when I was dividing my time between Beaumont and Houston — I moved to Beaumont in March of last year. The bar sent out a notice about the clinic, asking for volunteers. I come from a long line of veterans. My father was a Marine who served in the Pacific during World War II, so like so many, I have a deep admiration for veterans and what they've given to our country. When the opportunity to volunteer at the clinic arose, I jumped at the chance to help.

**Tell us about your experience volunteering at the Jefferson County Bar's November 2010 clinic.**

I was surprised at how many veterans came to the clinic (101 veterans attended). I met with several veterans who had specific questions about probate issues, was able to answer most of their questions, and got the distinct feeling that most veterans went away feeling their time had been well spent. Most had done their research already and asked good questions.

**Are there any particular cases that stood out to you?**

There were two veterans whom I was glad to be able to help. Both were Vietnam-era veterans, which is my era, too. I prepared will packets for them both. One qualified for legal aid and the other did not, but I told the bar that I would like to take that case pro bono. It was a very small thing for me to do for these veterans. Both seemed genuinely pleased with the services and documents provided. One veteran sent me a nice thank-you note, saying "The process was pleasant and rewarding in many ways. It started in the month for giving thanks and finished in the month for giving gifts."

## VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Last fall, the Cameron County Bar Association became one of several local bars to participate in the Library of Congress Veterans History Project, which provides resources for individuals or groups who want to record and preserve the oral histories of American wartime veterans. Cameron County Bar President **Jesse Quezada, Jr.** and 10 other members gathered in Quezada's law office on Sept. 24 to conduct interviews with 20 local veterans, most from World War II or the Korean War.

"All of us were very touched and moved by their stories," said Quezada. "The memories of these veterans were so vivid — both the good and bad."

On hand to record the interviews were members from the Texas Court Reporters Association (TCRA). TCRA volunteers, led by TCRA Veterans History Project Liaison Stephanie Moses, have been instrumental in coordinating the Veterans History Project with local bar associations. The State Bar joined with the TCRA at the 2011 Annual Meeting to help launch the project.

To date, close to 100 interviews have been recorded. "My initial hope for this program was something that attorneys and stenographic court reporters could work together on outside of the courtroom or deposition suite," said Moses, "but I had no idea the type of response we would get. Truly, everybody who has conducted one of these interviews walks out of the room with such a feeling of satisfaction." TCRA volunteers send the interviews to Moses, who

prepares them to be sent to the Library of Congress. A copy also goes to the veteran and his family. Other local bar associations that have gotten involved include Bexar County, Coastal Bend, Houston, Liberty County, Tarrant County, and Texarkana. Histories have also been taken in Lubbock and Amarillo, and an event is planned for Dallas.

In Cameron County, the TCRA area coordinator Sue Saenz contacted Quezada and Cameron County Bar Executive Director Lupita Salazar about the project and it immediately took off.

"We had a lot of support from our members," said Quezada. "There is a great appreciation for what these veterans did for our country." Quezada conducted three interviews, including one with U.S. Magistrate Judge **Felix Recio**, who served in Vietnam. It was the first time Recio had really spoken about his service. Another interview was with an 82-year-old World War II veteran who trained as a flight engineer and flew 20 missions in Europe.

"I was glad to do it. It felt great to document these stories for their families, and the veterans were so appreciative and felt a sense of relief from telling their story," said Quezada.

To learn more about the Veterans History Project, visit [www.loc.gov/vets](http://www.loc.gov/vets), or for local bar associations or law firms wanting to participate in conducting interviews of veterans, contact Stephanie Moses at (214) 653-7178 or [stephanie\\_moses@sbcglobal.net](mailto:stephanie_moses@sbcglobal.net) for more information. — JM