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Kuzma honored for dedication to poor

You could almost truly call it divine intervention. Abby Kuzma had moved back to Indiana from Washington, D.C. in the 1990s, with her husband and two children. She was staying home to raise her kids after fastpaced stints on Capitol Hill, and sort of wondering what was next in her life. On Palm Sunday in 1992, she sat in the pew of a local church and heard the pastor speak of his dream for a legal clinic serving the poorer neighborhoods in Indianapolis. The more Kuzma, a 1981 graduate of Indiana University School of Law-Bloomington, listened, the more excited she became. "I just remember thinking, 'Wow, this is perfect,'" she said.

Two years later, the Mapleton-Fall Creek Christian Legal Clinic was born. It has grown and matured into the Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic (**NCLC**), serving eight Indianapolis neighborhoods, Noblesville, and stretching to Fort Wayne. Kuzma has led the clinic as executive director since its formation, and it is for this dedication to helping central Indiana's low-income citizens gain access to legal assistance that she has become the 2008 recipient of the Antoinette Dakin Leach Award.

The Antoinette Dakin Leach Award recognizes a female attorney for her professional and personal accomplishments. Antoinette Dakin Leach (1859-1922) gained admittance to the Indiana Bar only after the Indiana Supreme Court overruled a lower court ruling which stated that a woman was "not a citizen in the sense that she could hold office and practice law." Ms. Leach went on to a successful career as an attorney and was a state and national leader in the suffragist movement.

Kuzma says she felt called to start the clinic in 1992, but her call to public service came before then. She volunteered during college at the University of Wisconsin with a local pro bono provider, and went to work when she was done with law school as a legislative assistant for Sen. Richard G. Lugar and later as a subcommittee chief counsel for the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee.

As she embarked on working with a core group of six attorneys to make **NCLC** a reality, she learned more and more about the need for legal services in Indianapolis. At the time, no other the faith-based inner city pro bono legal clinic existed in Indianapolis. "There was a very clear need for legal services in the community; less than 10 percent of those who needed legal services were able to access them," Kuzma said.

The Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic now operates with approximately 20 paid staff and attorneys and 10 legal interns, as well as many attorneys who volunteer their time. The clinic represents clients in a variety of civil actions, including tax issues, immigration, landlord-tenant issues, housing, public benefits, family law (excluding divorce), and contracts. Its services are free to clients whose income falls below 125 percent of the federal poverty level.

"Abby is an inspiring and substantial lawyer beyond any common measure," said John C. Hoard, who nominated Kuzma for the Antoinette Dakin Leach Award. "Her uncommon combination of intellectual acuity, spiritual devotion, and tireless enthusiasm for the delivery of legal services by and through the clinic is breathtaking, incredible and awesome."

Hoard, who serves on the **NCLC** board, goes on to say that Kuzma "sets the gold standard for legal pro bono services."

Kuzma is thrilled that the clinic's main office has relocated this summer to a new building at 3333 N. Meridian St. More space and a more visible location will hopefully lead to increased services to clients and more corporate support. "We try to respond to community needs with our programs," she said. "We have been invited into neighborhoods to open intake sites, to be right there to help those who need assistance. Where there's a need, we'll keep growing and looking for partners to help us grow."

According to the organization's 2007 annual report, the clinic's 10 intake sites served a total of 6,185 people, a 25 percent growth over 2006; of those, more than 3,500 were helped with legal issues. **NCLC** also provides preventive law education workshops, immigrant outreach, taxpayer clinics, and home-ownership workshops. They have been diving headlong into the mortgage foreclosure issues many Hoosiers are facing.

When she's not working tirelessly at **NCLC**, Kuzma enjoys reading, traveling, and visiting her new grandchild. You might even see her and her husband, Benjamin, riding their tandem recumbent bicycle along the canal towpath or the Monon Trail.

But what seems to energize her more is the notion of being able to help the neediest of our community's poor. "I like being busy. This is a really rewarding place to be," Kuzma said. "The most fun part of my job is the visioning - to work with my board and staff to look at the needs of the community and figure out how we can respond to them."

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