

VICTIM/WITNESS PROJECT



Photo by Bob McCormack

"The courtroom is a stage where the atmosphere is always frantic. The Junior League of Tulsa volunteers are the stage directors working to get the players (witnesses) ready and then bringing them on stage when needed," said Jim Brandon, Assistant District Attorney.

In October 1981 the Oklahoma Legislature passed the Victim Bill of Rights which required establishing the position of Victim/Witness Coordinator in cities of a population of 60,000 or more. Not required in the statute was the establishing of a Victim/Witness Center, but David Moss, Tulsa District Attorney, was able to secure a space. The Victim/Witness Center was born in January, 1982.

The Junior League of Tulsa, Inc. studied the Victim/Witness program as a task force for two years. When it became a League project, volunteers began to serve as liaisons between the District Attorney's Office and the Victim/Witness Center. League members go to the courtroom and get information from the attorneys and escort the witnesses to the courtroom. "Escorts make sure the DA is present and try to prevent any contact between the witness

and the defendant. Sometimes League volunteers sit with the victims during their testimony," said Mary Jo Speaker, Co-ordinator of the Victim/Witness Center.

On any given day the court docket might contain as many as 68 cases with each case averaging two witnesses. The docket is read at 9:00 a.m. and the judge decides which cases will be heard and in what order. Victims or witnesses of crimes must sometimes wait hours to testify. They stay in the Center to avoid confrontations with defendants.

Throughout the morning of preliminary hearings the scene is often one of perpetual crisis. "The attorneys in the DA's office can appear less than diplomatic. The volunteers see us going from one crisis to another working with other lawyers, judges and each other. The volunteers alleviate stress for the witness by being supportive," said Brandon.

Morning volunteers provide information on court procedures to the state's witnesses who have been subpoenaed for a case. Volunteers also contribute to the smooth running of the morning court docket by

seeing that the proper witnesses get to the courtroom on time.

Project volunteers also assist with parole notification, sending letters to victims or their families to inform them when a defendant is eligible for parole. The victim or his family can then write a letter or appear before the parole board.

Early-intervention volunteers send form letters with enclosure cards to victims of crime. The letter informs the victim of help such as counseling or the Victim's Compensation Fund. The victim may return the enclosure card requesting help.

Finally, League volunteers serve on a speaker's bureau, providing an educational tool to inform community and church groups about the Victim/Witness Center.

"The JLT volunteers have enabled us to assist victims and witnesses more than we ever could have before. Despite our best intentions we can't give personal care when we have 60 witnesses a day. The JLT helps us to help them," said Brandon.

Jane Hawkins