WHEN GOD CALLS YOU TO SOMETHING NEW

Retirement, Change, and Life’s Unexpected Curve Ball

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AN INTERVIEW WITH JIM RICHARDSON

During and after a successful and rewarding law career, attorney Jim Richardson has served the needy with his legal skills for over sixteen years. Christian Legal Society’s Director of Christian Legal Aid, Ken Liu, asked Jim to share his thoughts on serving the Lord in his “life after law.”

Ken: You had a long and successful law career before retiring a decade ago. Can you tell us a little about your career?

Jim: I graduated from Valparaiso University in 1967. I enrolled in law school at Valpo but during my first year the Vietnam War was really heating up. I didn’t want to get drafted into the Army, so I volunteered for the Air Force in 1968 and became a 2nd Lieutenant. I was assigned to be a Titan II missile combat crew member at Little Rock Air Force Base in Arkansas. While there, I attended the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) School of Law at night but had to stop because of my Air Force responsibilities.

After I got out of the Air Force in 1972, my wife and I moved to Columbus, Ohio, where I got a job as an insurance claims adjuster. My job required me to go to court from time to time and, while in court, I would look at the lawyers and think, “I can do a better job than that.” I decided I wanted to go back to law school, so I started law school again at night at UALR in 1975.

When I graduated in 1979, I initially struggled to find a legal position, but by God’s grace I got a position with an international insurance brokerage firm in Phoenix, Arizona, and then worked for one of its clients in 1985. In 1991, I was offered a job at the University Medical Center Corporation (UMCC) in Tucson and became the vice president and in-house counsel. I loved working for UMCC and worked there for almost 19 years, retiring in 2010. As part of that job, I was fortunate to be able to go to Grand Cayman 35 times. It was a tough job, but someone had to do it.
Ken: Did you have a plan for life after law as you approached retirement age? What was the transition like for you going from a full-time legal career to retirement?

Jim: I did not have a plan for life after retirement. I enjoyed my job and was usually pretty busy, so I just worked from day to day and didn’t think much about when I would retire. In 2008, things started to get very stressful at the hospital. I remember coming home once and telling Meg: “I love UMCC and I love my job, but I don’t want to die in my office.” That was when I started thinking about a retirement date.

I set the date for January 2010. I would be sixty-five in February 2010. My wife Meg used to say I was a workaholic and that it would be hard for me to retire. I disagreed, and said it would take me about five minutes to get used to retirement. I was right! The only time it was difficult was in January 2011. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and several others were shot in the parking lot of a Safeway Store that was only five miles from my home. All of the dead and wounded were taken to UMCC. Had I still been working I would have been one of the leaders responding to the crisis because Emergency Preparedness reported to me. I felt lost just sitting at home for about two weeks after the shooting. Other than that, though, I adjusted to retirement just fine.

My only plan for retirement was that I would continue to be involved with the CLS-Tucson Christian Legal Aid ministry. In the end, I also joined the Christian Legal Society Board of Directors in 2010 and served as Chair of the Legal Aid Ministries Committee until October 2016. That was unexpected, and it actually kept me pretty busy.

Ken: How did you get started serving in Christian Legal Aid?

Jim: I’ve been a member of the CLS-Tucson Attorney Chapter since about 1995. In July 2003, Roy Tulgren, the Executive Director of the Tucson Gospel Rescue Mission (GRM), came to a monthly meeting of CLS-Tucson. He told us about the GRM and asked us to consider providing legal assistance to GRM residents at its Men’s and Women’s Centers. We agreed to consider his request and pray about it. We also sought advice from John Robb, who was the national director of CLS’ Christian Legal Aid Ministries at that time.

In December 2003, another CLS-Tucson attorney, Scott Rash, and I saw our first clients at the GRM Men’s Center. It felt very good to be there. We decided to continue, and CLS-Tucson has been conducting a legal clinic there ever since. We now conduct four pro bono legal clinics a month, two each at the Men’s and Women’s Centers. We also take GRM residents to the Tucson Homeless Courts twice a month.

I continued being involved in the CLS-Tucson legal aid program when I retired in 2010. I’m still the coordinator of the CLS-Tucson program even now. I haven’t figured out how to retire from serving God. I don’t think we’re supposed to do that.

Ken: Can you tell us more about the “Homeless Court”? What is that and how did you get it started?

Jim: God got it started. When CLS-Tucson started doing the legal clinics in 2004, our original plan was to spend about 30 minutes with each GRM resident to identify their legal problems
and then give them a simple three- or four-step plan to help resolve their problems. It didn’t take long for us to figure out that most of GRM residents had open cases in court that could only be resolved by going to court. Also, because the residents were often recovering from severe substance abuse problems, they often didn’t have the mental wherewithal to execute any plan that we gave them. The only way to really help would be to take them to court to resolve their cases.

The problem with that plan was the residents did not want to go to court because they had had bad experiences in court. Many also had active arrest warrants and were afraid they might be arrested and taken to jail if they went to court. Us volunteer attorneys weren’t eager to go to court ourselves because none of us practiced that type of law. The only experience we had with City Court was if we personally got a traffic ticket.

So, at our CLS-Tucson chapter meeting in July 2004, we prayed that God would show us a way to take the GRM residents to court without the risk of them going to jail. He did, and the answer was to contact City Court Judge Mike Pollard about possibly setting up a special court program.

After attending a conference on “homeless courts” in San Diego, Judge Pollard convened a meeting of himself, me, the city prosecutor, public defender, and someone from a veterans group called “Coming Home.” We agreed to begin a homeless court program in Judge Pollard’s courtroom on December 30, 2004. I took four ladies from the GRM Women’s Center, and Coming Home brought some veterans. Judge Pollard quashed active arrest warrants and used community service hours to pay many fines. He was able to resolve all of the cases for each of the ladies and the veterans.

The court session went exceptionally well. We all agreed to continue the homeless court one Friday each month in Judge Pollard’s courtroom. We decided there should be four rules:

- First, to be eligible to come to Homeless Court, a person must be participating in an in-residence life restoration or rehabilitation program of some type for 45 days.
- Second, no one goes to jail just because he/she comes to Homeless Court, even if the person has an active arrest warrant.
- Third, participants in the Homeless Court program need to be “clean.”
- Fourth, the participant’s recovery program case manager needs to come to court with the participant.

Homeless Court is a friendlier place than most regular courtrooms. People know the judge will treat them with respect and will try to help them, not punish them. The judge makes an announcement to the courtroom when a person graduates from the Homeless Court program, and everyone in the courtroom stands and applauds. It’s pretty special.

We are now entering the seventeenth year of the Tucson Homeless Court Program. Thousands of individuals have benefited from the program by being able to reenter society with no open court cases and no fines or arrest warrants. As far as I know, the Tucson Homeless Court Program is unique and perhaps the only one of its kind in the whole country.
Ken: Can you share any memorable client stories from the clinic?

Jim: One time a gentleman came in who had twenty-seven misdemeanor cases. He was quiet, had his hands folded between his legs, and was looking at the floor. He seemed very down and embarrassed. I thought to myself, “What can I say to this guy that will cheer him up a little and make him feel better about himself?” Suddenly some words came to me. I said, “If you came to this legal clinic thinking you were going to set a record for new cases, I’ve got some bad news for you. You aren’t even close to the record. The record is sixty-six cases. And, if you thought you were coming to the legal clinic to see a perfect attorney, I’ve got some more bad news for you. I’m not a perfect attorney. I’m a saved sinner just like you, but you and I are going to review all of your cases together and with God’s help we will develop a plan to take care of your cases.” He looked up at me and smiled, and we got busy working on his plan.

That describes what we do at our legal clinics. We provide people with hope and a plan, and we help them execute the plan. We don’t have to be experts in every aspect of the law. We just need to show up at the clinics and be willing to be used by God to help people who really need our help. And we pray. We pray a lot, for the people we see and the plans we have developed.

Once I also helped a GRM resident resolve a case in the Tucson City Court when the hearing was conducted in Spanish, and I don’t even speak Spanish! I didn’t know that the judge spoke Spanish, but he did and he picked up on the fact that English was the resident’s second language, so he started speaking Spanish to the resident. I had no idea what he was saying and what the resident was saying, but after a couple of minutes, tears started falling from the resident’s eyes and she said: “Hallelujah. Praise Jesus!” I turned to the judge and said, “Your honor, I have no idea what just happened, but if my client is saying ‘Hallelujah’ and ‘Praise Jesus,’ that’s good enough for me. Thank you very much!” It turned out that he had resolved all of the resident’s cases.

Ken: How fulfilling, or challenging, has it been serving in Christian Legal Aid during your retirement?

Jim: It has been very fulfilling. We frequently get to see GRM residents shortly after they first arrive, and we get to see them make progress in their recovery program. The attorneys in our program all feel we are blessed as much as the GRM residents we are trying to help. We sometimes run across them when they get jobs. Just recently a solar panel sales rep rang my doorbell at home. When I answered the door, she said excitedly, “I know you! You helped me at the Gospel Rescue Mission.” That was a fun moment.

Christian Legal Aid can also be challenging. Many times, when I drive to the GRM clinic, I think to myself, “God, I don’t know why you are sending me to this legal clinic. You and I both know that I am not qualified to help these people.” Then, I get to the clinic and find I can help the people by just showing up and being willing to be used by God.

Sometimes things don’t turn out well. For instance, I may be waiting at the court for a resident to arrive, and he or she doesn’t. I call the GRM and find out that the person has relapsed. It hurts when that happens because I care about the people we are trying to help.

Another challenge is to make sure that I spend time with Meg and honor her in our retirement. I also want to be a good grandfather to my grandchildren.

Ken: What advice do you have for attorneys who are approaching retirement age?

Jim: Don’t stop serving the Lord. Or maybe start serving the Lord if you thought you were too busy before. Do you really want to spend all of your retirement time playing golf or cards? Wouldn’t you rather use your legal education and experience to help people who really need your help?

If the CLS-Tucson lawyers weren’t there to help the people in our Christian Legal Aid program, the people would get no help at all. Most lawyers do not perform pro bono service. The people we see never make it to the secular legal aid programs.

Put your faith into action, just like the heroes of faith that are mentioned in Hebrews. You can have a tremendous impact on the lives of others who have no legal hope other than you. You can do this. Get involved in a Christian Legal Aid program. It’s not hard. Trade in your former paycheck for eternal rewards. If you live near a Gospel Rescue Mission, check it out. See if it has a recovery program. Maybe you can start your own Christian Legal Aid program. CLS is willing to help, and I am too.

Jim Richardson and his wife Meg have been married 51 years and live in Or Valley, Arizona, a suburb of Tucson. They have two children (Matt and Sarah) and five grandchildren. Both Jim and Meg have retired from their paying jobs, but they haven’t retired from life or serving the Lord.