



HARRIETT BUHAI  
CENTER FOR  
FAMILY LAW

# Betty L. Nordwind

The State Bar of California

## 2014 Loren Miller Legal Services Award

*Betty L. Nordwind, Executive Director of the Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law, was honored in 2014 by the California State Bar with the Loren Miller Legal Services Award, a lifetime achievement award for her long-term commitment to providing legal services to low-income persons. Below is a biography of Betty written by Amy Yarbrough that appeared in the California Bar Journal.*

A visit from the FBI and New York City police officers in high school must have made it clear that Betty Nordwind was not your average teenager.

Angered by a newspaper article she'd read about police brutality, Nordwind fired off a letter in protest, which prompted the visit from authorities, who were convinced someone had put her up to it.

**“They didn’t think this was just an isolated high school kid writing a letter protesting police brutality,” said Nordwind, who – uncharacteristic of most teens – had a photo of the U.S. Supreme Court justices hanging on her bedroom wall.**

Nordwind also took part in the March on Washington in 1963 and organized a drive at her school to send school supplies to Central America.

“My mother told me the principal told her, ‘I can’t wait until she gets out of high school. I’m so tired of shipping these cartons down to Central America,’ ” Nordwind recalled.

Years later, Nordwind’s interest in fairness and justice shows no signs of wavering. Executive Director of the Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law in Los Angeles for 27 years, Nordwind will be recognized for her commitment to legal services with the 2014 Loren Miller Legal Services Award.

Created in 1977 and given each year during the State Bar’s Annual Meeting, the Loren Miller Legal Services Award recognizes individuals who have demonstrated a long-term commitment to legal services and done significant work to extend legal services to the poor.

Nordwind described being chosen to receive the award as an honor, but also “a little overwhelming,” noting that she only learned of her nomination after the materials were sent in.



*At a time when most high school kids had pictures of the Beatles covering their walls, Betty (pictured above in her bedroom as a teen), always a crusader for the rights of the poor and disenfranchised, had a picture of the U.S. Supreme Court Justices tacked to her bulletin board.*

“To some degree, it gives you a newfound respect for yourself,” she said. The word “vindicated” also comes to mind.

“I went against the grain in many different ways for a long time,” she said. “I have stayed the course, and public interest does have tremendous meaning and value.”

Growing up in New York City during the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, Nordwind said she was not only “born at the right time,” but that her parents “while not political in the sense of activists, always had a good set of values and respect for people.”

After college, Nordwind planned to go into social work, but became less and less excited upon seeing the jobs available to her. When she learned that one

## Betty L. Norwind, 2014 Loren Miller Legal Services Award

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woman she knew was in law school and another was applying, “a light bulb went off.” Nordwind took the LSAT on April 4, 1968, the day of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination.

After graduating from the University of Colorado School of Law in 1971, she began working at Metropolitan Denver Legal Aid handling welfare, consumer, housing and family law cases. In 1975, she established the organization’s first mental health law unit, after securing a contract with the city and county for the legal aid organization to represent people who were being committed under the mental health statute.

“I cut my teeth with some very good legal services lawyers who taught me how to be a good lawyer,” Nordwind said of her days in Denver.

Nearly 10 years later, after working as a private consultant and for other legal assistance organizations in Colorado and Massachusetts, Nordwind joined LA’s Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law.

With Nordwind at its helm, the agency expanded from two staff members, 35 volunteers and a budget of \$160,000 in its early days to an organization with more than \$1.6 million in annual funding. Today, there are 19 funded staff positions and 300-plus volunteers. The Center now helps more than 900 low-income persons a year with family law and domestic violence matters, including custody, paternity, child support and restraining orders.

Over the years, Nordwind has also taught and set an example for countless attorneys, according to Ana Storey, who describes her as a “godmother to many of us in the family law public interest world here in LA.”

Director of Client and Community Services for the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, Storey met Nordwind 16 or 17 years ago when Storey was a law clerk for the Center. She said Nordwind remains just as committed as the day she met her.

“It’s her passion. Betty can get fired up about injustice and get the rest of us fired up too,” Storey said.

During her early years with the Center, Nordwind developed a clinic-based volunteer system with attorneys overseeing volunteers, who in turn guided

self-represented litigants. Later, she began recruiting lawyers to provide pro bono representation to low-income clients with more complex cases.

Knowing that it is often difficult for low-income clients to get to the Center, Nordwind partnered with other community organizations, legal aid offices and churches to provide services at their locations. Each month, the Center also provides legal services to low-income students at community colleges across the county.

In 2004, she worked with then-Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca to bring legal education classes to female inmates in the county. The project, attended by more than 16,000 inmates so far, will resume again later this year. Recently, she also obtained grant funding to provide legal education on domestic violence issues to women veterans.

Another of Nordwind’s key areas of focus has been ensuring that low-income litigants are not prevented from accessing the judicial system because of court fees. To that end, the Center recruited the appellate law firm Horvitz & Levy to take on precedent-setting cases that challenged Los Angeles County Superior Court’s fees for mandatory family law mediations and the court’s denial of applications for waivers of court fees.

Firm partner David Ettinger, who handled those pro bono cases for the Center and serves on its Board of Directors, called Nordwind “a major force in extending legal services to the poor.

“Although I have worked on pro bono cases with other fine public interest organizations, I have met no one as fiercely and tenaciously dedicated as is Betty to providing equal access to justice for the poor,” he wrote in a letter in support of her award nomination. “Even after her many years of service, Betty remains remarkably indefatigable in pursuing equal justice.”

Nordwind attributes her long tenure with the Center to the quality of people she works with and the fact that each day on the job is stimulating.

“I think what we are doing as it impacts poor people, poor children is very important,” she said. “We have a tremendous community of people who care.”

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