

## Defending the poor

**D**AN Barba is not your run-of-the-mill lawyer. He believes the pervasive influence of lawyers has disseminated a narrow and homogeneous world view with a devastating effect on our society.

He also left a prominent Los Angeles law firm to work at the East Bay Community Law Center, taking a 70 percent pay cut in the process.

"No one was surprised," he said, smiling at the memory of breaking the news to his law firm colleagues. "They weren't surprised that I was leaving for public interest work. I think they may have been a little surprised by the size of the pay cut."

The son of a labor organizer and a seamstress who worked in sweatshops, Barba grew up in the heart of the East Los Angeles barrio. His parents had the dream of a better life for their children and Barba surpassed their expectations. He graduated from Harvard University.

After a stint working for a major bank, he decided to go to law school.

"I was the product of a progressive, left-wing family. I had seen discrimination and poverty growing up. And we were taught we had to give back to our community."

At Boalt Hall, however, he found a more conservative institution than he had expected. "I wasn't learning any tools to help my community." He signed up for the clinic offered by the recently formed Berkeley Community Law Center. The center was started by Boalt Hall law students who felt the same frustrations as Barba.

"It was amazing. It was all the reasons I had come to law



Brenda  
PAYTON

school. I was reinvigorated," he said. "I'll never forget my first client. He was a white, homeless man who lived under the freeway overpass near Spenger's. He was HIV-positive. He couldn't go to the doctor because he didn't have money for bus fare."

In the course of working on his disability case, Barba had

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to take him to the doctor's office.

"In law school they would say that was social work, not legal work. But if I hadn't taken him, he wouldn't have gotten the necessary documentation and I wouldn't have won his case," he said. "When you are providing legal services for the poor, you can't have those blinders on. It's a redefinition of legal services."

Facing a huge sum of student loans after law school, he took a job at the prestigious Los Angeles firm. But he never fitted in.

"My heart wasn't in it," he recalled. Barba is a chronic asthmatic and the stress of the job triggered the most serious asthmatic episode he'd had since he was a child. "I think if I had stayed there I would have died," he said.

Luckily, he learned of a new position at the Law Center and applied. He's been on staff at the center, renamed the Eastbay Community Law Center, for the past five years.

"There's a lot of stress here. I lost a client yesterday. It's stressful to know your client may lose their housing if you lose the case. But it's much more worthwhile to me than helping a multi-million dollar company make another million dollars," he said.

As a supervising attorney in the Center's HIV/AIDS Law Project, he teaches law students in the clinic class, overseeing their work on cases; he also represents clients. Their work includes disability cases, wills, powers of attorney for health care and finances as well as MediCal and Medicare claims. The center has three other projects — housing, income support and economic development.

"Our mission is twofold, to teach students

and to serve poor communities. And we do amazingly well at both," Barba said. "Students tell me the center kept them in law school because it made their legal education relevant."

As resources for legal services to the poor dry up, the work of the center becomes even more crucial.

"We have a fundamental belief in fairness in American society," Barba said. "And poor people are dealt an unfair hand every day in numerous ways. Nothing in American life is not affected by law and to not provide legal assistance to poor people is to undercut that concept of fairness."

The Center celebrates its 10th anniversary Saturday, with a community forum at Children's Hospital and a party at Mr. E's.

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*Brenda Payton's column appears on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays.*