ND legal aid clinic opens office away from campus

By Mike Hogan

When one think of the University of Notre Dame, images of a beautiful cam-

pus, the Golden Dome and Touchdown Jesus come to mind.

But Notre Dame’s rich tradition and towering Gothic buildings can be trans-
mogrifying to those who have never stepped foot on a college campus.

Notre Dame Law School officials de-

cided the unique qualities that usually
drew people to their campus were actu-

ally pushing away clients the school’s legal aid clinic were looking to help.

So, because of its growing case load

and popularity among the law students,

school officials decided to open up a

second office away from the hallowed

halls of Notre Dame.

The Howard and St. Peter street clinic is

used to give students experience in deal-

ing with the court system while providing

legal services to area residents who oth-

erwise couldn’t afford it.

Clinic co-director and faculty member

Eileen M. Down is in her fourth year of

service to the clinic and thinks the new

office couldn’t have opened at a better
time.

“Notre Dame is a difficult place to get

around,” Down said. “I think the law

school itself is somewhat of an imposing

structure, and the university can be intima-

tating. Most of our clients have had no

other reason to come to a university.”

Down can recall struggling to give
client directions, some of whom couldn’t

read, to weave through the campus and

find the clinic.

“There’s hardly a place to park, and

once they do park, they don’t know how
close or for very long.” Down said. “It was

a nightmare trying to give them in-
nstructions when I didn’t even know which

side of the campus they will be entering

from.”

Even though the new office is only four

or five blocks away from campus, it’s

bigger and easier to find and located right

on the metro line.

law school dean David Laird said an

additional office was needed for both the

students and for the clients.

“The reason for opening another office

was a combination of needing more space

because there were more students interes-
ted in legal aid work, and it is a better

way to serve the community,” Laird said.

According to Laird, the clinic has seen a

large increase in immigration work be-

cause of the many people picking up inven-
table at the area U.S. district court.

“There’s a surprising amount of immi-
gration work we have here,” Laird said.

“Some of these people have been in the

United States for some time but have

never gotten their papers together. Some of

them have stayed and grown into other

types of work.”

Another factor was the lack of

neighbors or nearby local citizens, second-

and third-year students have provided legal

aid to the South Bend area for more than 10

years. Each student handles an average of

two or three cases for the clinic in addition

to their full schedule of classes. Students

even earn three credit hours per semester for

their volunteer clinic work.

The majority of cases involve family

law, but the clinic is divided into six dif-

ferent court-appointed special advocates

for children, case screening committees for

the Indiana Child Welfare Bureau, legal

services for the Center for the Homeless,

and Caseworker Education (CACE) mediators.

Second-year student Julie Douglas

thinks the clinic provides a valuable ser-

vice not only for her resume and experi-

ence but for the clients.

“The clinic gives private law students

what you don’t learn in class,” Douglas said.

“We appear in court before judges, argue

motions, negotiate with other attorneys,

draft memos.”

Douglas thinks the clinic has created a

new role for itself, since the client’s emer-

gence in the nearby inner city. Residents

always get a hand-on experience at the

campus-based clinic, but with bigger of-
fices and more student volunteers, the

clinic has attracted a second motion of

clients.

“The clinic is much more accessible to

clients,” Douglas said. “They won’t have

to find where it is in the basement of the

law school, which is hard to find.”

As Douglas knows, the bigger the office

the more cases there will be to handle.

The second-year student was with the

clinic last semester before the summer

opening the new office and has noticed a

big difference in client attitudes.

“We have 100 times thousand of rooms

here,” Douglas said. “I think that helps

the environment the students have to

work in, but clients feel more comfort-

able coming in here because there is a

private room for them to meet compre-

hensive with you.”