



*Jim Preis, Pam Marx, and Nancy Shea.*

## Present At the Creation

In January 1977, Jim Preis and Pam Marx were law students at USC and Nancy Shea was a law student at UCLA when they signed up as volunteers on a new project that was just underway to provide in-hospital advocacy for patients with mental and developmental disabilities. The project was originally funded for just two years—by which time all of them would have graduated and moved on. But instead they are still here today, 30 years later.

### How MHAS Began

In the early 1970s, the legal rights of people with mental disabilities were a hot topic. Judge Bazelon on the D.C. Circuit had issued a number of landmark decisions, and many states, including California, were passing laws establishing a “bill of rights” for patients committed to psychiatric facilities. The California law also required the state and the counties to appoint patients’ and residents’ rights “advocates.” But despite the legal protections that were being enacted, local newspapers almost daily carried articles about patient deaths and “cover-ups” of patient maltreatment and questionable medical practices.

In response to what was a clear need for

advocacy to protect the rights of patients in institutions, members of the Los Angeles County Bar Association and the Beverly Hills Bar Association decided to put together a project that would train volunteer attorneys and students and send them to local state hospitals. Working with Public Counsel, the bar associations submitted a grant proposal to the American Bar Association’s Commission on the Mentally Disabled. The ABA approved the proposal in December 1976, and the Mental Health Advocacy Project (MHAP) was launched, with a budget of just \$20,000 from the ABA grant, and matching funds from the local bar associations.

### Class Credit for Good Works

MHAP did not have a large staff. The plan was to recruit volunteers from law schools and other graduate programs and train them in mental health law. After the training, teams of four volunteers, under the supervision of a volunteer attorney, would be sent to work at Metropolitan State Hospital (for people with mental disabilities) or Fairview State Hospital (for people with developmental disabilities). The incentive for students to take part in the project was class credit for the hours worked in the hospitals.

And in fact the incentive worked. Within less than a month, more than 12 law students had volunteered, including Jim, Pam and Nancy. They went to training sessions at the end of January, and by February of 1977, the students were working in the hospitals.

### Free Cigarettes and Free Dimes

Jim, Nancy, and Pam spent a day each week at Metropolitan State Hospital.

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## Gina’s Story

“Gina” was referred to MHAS attorneys Maggie Brandow and Jodi Oguro by a mental health worker in Juvenile Hall. Gina is 15 years old, and she suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of severe childhood traumas, including being sexually assaulted by a family member. Over a period of several years, Gina was placed in many group homes, but she ran away each time. While living on the streets, she developed a drug habit. Eventually she was arrested for drug possession and sent to Juvenile Hall.

When Gina was not taking her psychotropic medication, she was quick to become violent. However, when on her medication and engaged in therapy, she was calm and insightful. Gina and her therapist felt that she needed to be in a locked mental health facility so she would not be able to keep running away and endangering herself. However, before such a placement could be identified, Gina was charged with assault after she tried to defend one of her friends in an altercation.

MHAS successfully argued for the assault charges against Gina to be reduced. Then, when Gina was referred to the Juvenile Mental Health Court, MHAS attended the initial hearing and provided input to the defense attorney, prosecuting attorney and judge. The Mental Health Court decided to take Gina’s case, MHAS provided placement recommendations, and just a few weeks later Gina was placed in a mental health facility that provides the intensive mental health services she needs. She is doing well in the placement and is thrilled to be out of Juvenile Hall.

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Their assignment was to make sure that patients understood their rights; to help patients resolve complaints; and when that didn't work, to assist them in obtaining the help of an attorney. Getting access to the wards was not easy. Staff and doctors were often uncomfortable with having outsiders “interfere.” But it was a good fit for Jim, Pam and Nancy, all of whom seemed to have a natural ability for interacting with the patients. Looking back, Nancy says: “I was always comfortable with the patients. I wasn't quite sure who they were or what to expect, but I always found my clients and their stories compelling.” More and more patients came to them for help with problems. (And some of their success may have been the result of the advocates handing out free dimes—for phone calls—and free cigarettes.)

### Staying the Course

After the first semester, with credits under their belt, Jim and Nancy continued to work on the project. “I was disturbed by what I saw in the hospitals,” Jim remembers. “I felt we were having a real impact, so I didn't want to stop.” Nancy was hired as a staff coordinator, and Jim continued to volunteer on Saturdays while finishing law school. After graduating in June 1978, Jim and Nancy worked full time on the project. (Pam left and later

worked at the Times Mirror Company, but she came back to MHAS in 1992). In 1979, the organization was incorporated as “Mental Health Advocacy Services,” and shortly after the project director, Mary Ann Bannan, moved to San Francisco, Jim became the Executive Director.

The work Jim, Nancy and Pam did on the wards at Metropolitan State Hospital shaped the future of MHAS. They saw a lot of problems and many unmet needs; people who were being treated dismally and whose liberties were being unfairly and unnecessarily restricted. But they also saw a revolving door where patients were released and were back in two weeks. The real issue, as Jim explains, “was not what happened in the hospital but what happened in the community.” As a result, while MHAS has continued periodically to work in mental hospitals, its focus has shifted to meeting the needs of clients in the community.

MHAS' mission today is to protect the legal rights of children and adults with mental disabilities, fight discrimination, and secure the resources individuals need to thrive in the community. By carrying out this mission, Jim, Nancy and Pam (along with the rest of MHAS' staff) are continuing what they started 30 years ago.



*MHAS' Special Education Outreach Project has conducted over 60 community training sessions in 2006 to teach parents how to obtain special education services for their children. Above, Dennis Perez hands out training materials to parents at a recent session.*

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## Mental Health Advocacy Services

3255 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 902  
Los Angeles, California 90010  
(213) 389-2077 [www.mhas-la.org](http://www.mhas-la.org)

MHAS is a private non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation sponsored by the Los Angeles County and Beverly Hills Bar Associations and the Mental Health Association in California. MHAS provides legal services to people with mental and developmental disabilities, with an emphasis on obtaining government benefits and services, protecting rights and fighting discrimination. MHAS also serves as a resource to the community by providing training and technical assistance to attorneys, mental health professionals, consumer and family member groups, and other advocates.



Law Clerk Rebecca Evans, seated, works with Staff Attorney Jodi Oguro

## Law Students Continue the Tradition

Since MHAS' inception, law students have been an integral part of the staff. Every year several law clerks spend their summer at MHAS, and other students work for course credit during the school year. Summer 2006 brought MHAS five law clerks: Lola Ajilore (University of San Diego, class of 2008), Grace Chien (Harvard, 2008), Kevin Cho (Loyola 2008), Rebecca Evans (Southwestern, 2008), and Robert Goldstein (Columbia, 2008). Some of their advocacy successes included:

- obtaining extended school year education services, transportation and additional hours with a one-on-one aide for a child with autism;
- filing a complaint on behalf of a student with learning disabilities who had been denied appropriate special education services, resulting in an administrative decision that

the school district was out of compliance with federal and state education laws;

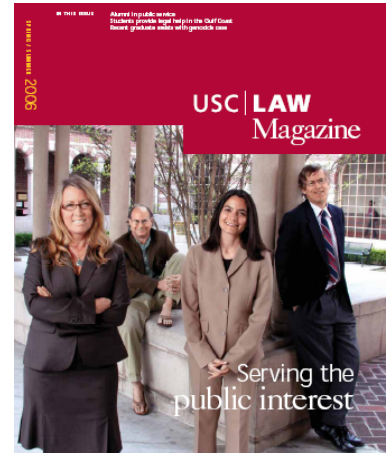
- negotiating to have a landlord withdraw an eviction notice for a single mother with two children with disabilities; and
- working with the public defender's office on behalf of a client who had recovered from substance abuse but had an outstanding warrant, with the result that the warrant was withdrawn without the client having to be detained.

Lola, Grace, Kevin, Rebecca and Robert made a difference in the lives of these and many other clients, while gaining valuable experience that will stay with them when they become lawyers, whether they pursue careers in public interest law or not. Rebecca has stayed on as a volunteer to work with MHAS attorneys in the Juvenile Hall Advocacy Clinic.

### "Gina's Story,"

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Thanks to grants from the Ralph M. Parsons Foundation and the Robert Ellis Simon Foundation, MHAS helped Gina and many other children in the juvenile court system in 2006. MHAS' work focused on securing appropriate mental health, special education and other services for teenagers who are at risk of long-term institutionalization.



The Spring/Summer 2006 issue of the USC Law Magazine featured MHAS Executive Director Jim Preis in a cover story about USC Law School graduates working in public interest law. The magazine can be viewed on the law school's website at: <http://weblaw.usc.edu/publications/usclawmag.cfm>.

## Fair Housing Project Educates by E-Mail

In June 2006, MHAS launched its "Fair Housing Tip of the Month" e-mail campaign to increase awareness of the fair housing rights of people with disabilities. The campaign targets emergency shelters and transitional housing programs, both of which play critical roles in helping homeless people get off the streets and take the first steps toward securing permanent housing. The project is funded by a grant from the U.S. Dept. of Housing & Urban Development's Fair Housing Initiatives Program (Grant #FH400G05009). In addition to distributing the fair housing e-mails, MHAS attorney Carey Stone and consultant Kim Savage are developing a comprehensive training manual, and they will hold training sessions for housing providers in early 2007. The monthly fair housing tips can be viewed at MHAS' website at [www.mhas-la.org/publications.html](http://www.mhas-la.org/publications.html).

### Did You Know?

You can support MHAS by shopping at local grocery stores, shopping online, selling items on ebay, or even just searching the internet.



For more information please visit our website at <http://www.mhas-la.org/donate.html>