FREE LEGAL ADVISE AT THE BAYLOR LAW SCHOOL

By Andrew Phillips

If you’re searching for practical legal advice, your search might be over. Waco residents, professors and student volunteers gathered at the Baylor Law School building Sunday for the People’s Law School, an annual event sponsored by law professionals where citizens get free legal advice at three out of 18 hour-long classes.

Patricia Wilson, law professor at Baylor and the People’s Law School coordinator, said that Waco isn’t the first community to host an event like this.

“The University of Houston Law School has done one for years. They were looking to expand [an event like this] and asked if I would consider doing one at Baylor,” Wilson said.

Wilson accepted Houston’s offer. And now, after eight years, more than 120 people register each time Baylor hosts the event. This year, Wilson said more than 200 people registered because of new sponsorship from the Waco Tribune-Herald and television station KWTX.

“Wills and estate planning is one [of the classes] that we’ve offered every single year because the response is always good,” Wilson said.

Waco resident Ruth Gordon attended the wills and estate planning class and real estate class. Gordon said the wills and estate planning class helped her during a time of transition in her life. “I can see these classes help in having some idea in whether you need a lawyer or not. I can see this helping you decide without spending money if you need to spend money on a lawyer,” Gordon said. She also said that the real estate class helped her in deciding what to do with a property she is thinking about purchasing.

Even Baylor students flocked to the event for the free advice. Steve Jensen, a business fellows major at Baylor, went to a class about the separation of church and state. Jensen said he enjoyed the class taught by professor Laura Hernández because it provided insight into topics he was studying in Baylor courses.

Participants in her class gathered in the brightly lit room while the sound of Hernández’s chalk screeched across the blackboard. “I’m Laura Hernández, professor of law at Baylor,” she said as she pointed to her name written on the board.

Hernández offered participants a perspective into the history, legal precedent and court opinions on the topic of separation of church and state. Hernández said that Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were the earliest to propose a freedom of religion clause in the Constitution. “There were numerous revisions to the clause until they finally settled at what we have today in the Constitution,” she said.

Other notable classes offered included Second Amendment rights, the Affordable Care Act, tenants rights, elder law, family law, veteran’s rights and small business law. There were 18 classes offered at the event.

While some students attended the classes, others volunteered at the event. “I really like the program. I just heard about it this week so I decided to come help,” Timothy Roehrs, a law school student, said. Roehrs said the classes were practical because the advice came from professionals on topics that are relevant to residents.

Volunteer Jessica Vittorio, a law school student, said, “The professors aren’t going to give you a course in some abstract legal concept that no one cares about.”

Some of the courses are provided on a rotating basis so that returning participants can get new information. “This year the hot topic was the Second Amendment, last year it was the Affordable Care Act,” Wilson said.

Wilson said that the People’s Law School is another way to give back to the community. Wilson gives back to the community through this event, but she also gives back in many other ways.

“I was adopted at a young age and wanted to give something back to the community. So I decided to be a foster parent,” Wilson said.

Wilson said she traded in her job as a foster parent for the job of mother when she decided to adopt two of her foster children. “We hung up our minivan. We’re not fostering anymore, but it really was because of that interest [to help the community] that we decided to foster” she said.

Those who give back the most to the community are the lawyers and professors who donate their time to teach the courses, Wilson said.

“I would tell people [attending these classes] that they should appreciate the person selected to teach that class because that’s the area they teach in, so they know what they’re talking about,” Wilson said.