

Local efforts define lawyer

By MEGHAN LEWIT
STAFF INTERN

The conference room in Paul W. Plotnick's Skokie office is standard issue for the law profession.

The plain white room with tranquil landscape prints on the walls gives away nothing about the middle-aged, genial man with a slightly wrinkled suit and a resume a mile long.

Within the confines of his own office, the clutter of work and personal items reveals more about the man. The room is filled with awards, accolades and plaques lining the walls, along with pictures of Plotnick with his white '78 Corvette, papers and folders that pile up inches high on his desk and a Dr. Evil doll propped up in the corner.

The 55-year old Plotnick, a Wilmette resident since 1983, proudly points out some of the awards he has received for his community service and his professional work, including being listed in "Who's Who in American Law."

Starting out in the public defender's office after a string of teaching and odd jobs with the CTA, Plotnick spent the early years of his law career

defending minors in juvenile court.

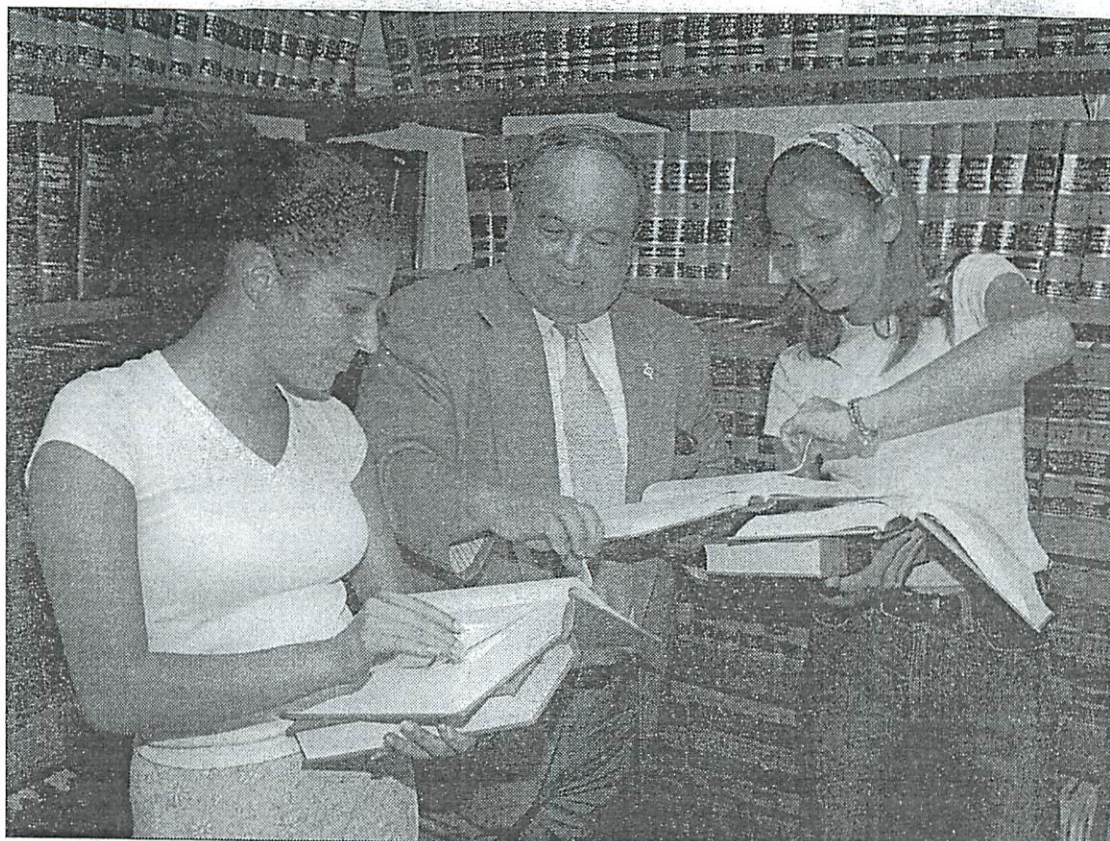
"I believe that helping children is really, really important to our society. Unfortunately some terrible things happen to children, they're growing up and somebody has to be there to protect them."

Plotnick said that working with kids has been an integral part of his life since his days as a Chicago public school teacher.

As a longtime member, and past president and secretary, of the Skokie Valley Kiwanis organization, he has worked to raise money for local charities and sponsors a girls' baseball team in Skokie. He also worked to get not-for-profit government status for a school in India for deaf and disabled children and volunteers as a Sea Explorer Scout Leader.

Plotnick said that growing up on the South Shore of Chicago he always knew he wanted to be a lawyer.

"I used to watch Perry Mason when I was a kid. I've been waiting my whole life for someone to jump up in the back of the courtroom and say they did it, but it's never happened," Plotnick joked.



Geoff Scheerer/Pioneer Press

Attorney Paul Plotnick goes over material with Alexa Tiritev, right, and Alina Shutman in his Skokie office. Plotnick has focused his professional and volunteer work on local issues over the years.

However, it took some time before Plotnick was able to live out his courtroom fantasies. After finishing his undergraduate degree at Southern Illinois University in the social turmoil of the Vietnam War, Plotnick ended up in the army as a sergeant in the infantry teaching riot control techniques to the National Guard.

After being honorably discharged from his stint in the army, he taught high school during the day, attending classes at DePaul University College of Law at night.

"It wasn't easy," Plotnick said of the four years he taught at three Chicago Public high schools. He described how, at one particularly tough school, the trailer that served

as his mobile classroom was burned to the ground, and how he had a knife pulled on him. However, he added that one of his most rewarding experiences was helping to develop a program for mentally and handicapped students at Hubbard High School.

Plotnick got his law degree in 1974 and was quickly hired (Continued on page 11)

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by the public defender's office where he tried a number of murder and felony cases in addition to defending juveniles. In 1979 he opened his own practice in Skokie where he has continued to do trial work in addition to probate, divorce, civil cases, personal injury and pro bono work in Juvenile Court.

Plotnick said that he enjoys trying criminal cases, citing one of his most memorable cases from the 1970's when he defended a man who had burned his wife with gasoline. He won the case on appeal with an insanity defense.

Plotnick added that over the years he has had to face the same questions that all defense attorneys must ask themselves: how do they justify defending people they know are guilty?

"That's always a question that all lawyers get asked," Plotnick said. "I think that you are the voice of that individual and guilt and innocence is something that the court or jury decides. It's not your responsibility to be the prosecutor, you're there to defend these people."

Plotnick is candid about his defeats as well as his successes. Earlier this year, Plotnick ran for Circuit Court judge, Ninth Subcircuit, which would have included his home town of Wilmette in his jurisdiction, and was defeated in the March election.

Running was a full-time job which took time away from his law practice. He added that he also ran for village trustee in 1979.

Plotnick said that he plans to continue with his social work in both Skokie and Wilmette where he has lived with his wife and daughter since 1983.