

## *Advocates for Those in Need*

As I walk into the Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centre, Gillian Richardson greets me cheerily from a corner of the floor where she is talking to a small child. Then, as I go on further into the main office, I come upon our former churchwarden, Dr Patrick Lawrence, who is absorbed with a document on a computer. Patrick is Chair of the Board as well as being a volunteer. It is not only through raising money at our Summer and Christmas Markets that St Mary's has been involved with the Centre.

Carole Roberts, the manager, has a friendly smile and a reassuring warmth about her but I soon realise that she, as well as the rest of her team, are highly professional, tough negotiators—a supremely able and determined 'voice for those who cannot speak for themselves', as Carole puts it. Carole has been working for the Advice Centre since 1989, when two groups from Rose Hill and Donnington set it up. Sharon Bates, Julie Woodley, and Sarah Meziu make up the rest of the team of part-time staff.

Although none of them is a trained lawyer, the workers at the Advice Centre keep themselves well versed in all the latest, often complicated, changes in laws concerning indebtedness, access to state benefits, evictions and repossessions by mortgage lenders—the main focuses of their work. Their lack of resources normally makes it out of the question to employ a solicitor to defend their clients in court, so they do it themselves. 'With what results?' I ask, increasingly intrigued by this small band of courageous and evidently skilled advocates for those in need. And the answer confirms that they are certainly no walkover—95 per cent success in cases of claims for disability allowance and 99 per cent success in eviction cases. In matters of eviction and repossession, though, they are often able to settle disputes out of court as they are wise enough to 'have kept good relationships' with bailiffs and mortgage lenders.

Demands on the Advice Centre have risen lately, owing both to the recession and to the recent changes in the state benefit regulations. A young man with a child to look after had been in that morning. His crisis benefit had come to an end and the child benefit due to him was being delayed because of a complicated situation with the girl's mother. 'I gave him a token for the food bank', said Carole, 'and advised him where to go to look for more help. It breaks your heart sometimes.' Julie and Sharon were particularly incensed about another case of a young mother who was bearing twins, one of whom had died in the womb. 'It was the stress about her benefits claims that was behind this tragedy,' says Julie bitterly.

The Advice Centre has received enough money, mostly from Oxford City Council, to carry on paying its staff and the rent of the office for this financial year. But this does not cover either the training courses essential to keep the staff up to date with legal changes or necessary books which, since law books are in great demand, are very expensive. 'This book cost £100', says Sharon, waving a rather unimpressive-looking paperback in the air. But without such books (and the hard work they put into reading them) the staff would no longer be able to act so successfully as 'lay advocates' in court. There is no guarantee of future funding either. 'We stagger on from year to year,' says Carole.

This year we are going to hold no Summer and Christmas Markets, our usual way of fund-raising for the Centre and other local projects. We are therefore asking members of this parish, which encompasses Rose Hill, Iffley, and Donnington, to come up with suggestions for other fund-raising initiatives and to find people who are willing to give the time and the energy to carry them out. One easy idea will be for us to join the sponsored walk already being planned for 17 September.

The Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centre is run by staff and volunteers who have taken sides for the poor and the underprivileged, not only in their hearts but with their actions. Is it enough to wish them good luck, perhaps say a prayer for them, and then go on with our lives as usual?

Please get in touch with me as soon as you have decided what you are able to do (Oxford 395442; **wrtyndale\*googlemail.com** substituting @ for \*).

*Wendy Tyndale*