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Chuck Hogren: "The Reluctant Defender" Still Defends

Sankofa is an African word from the Akan tribe in Ghana that literally means "to go back and get it." (1) The symbol for Sankofa, a bird that looks backward and pulls an egg from its back as it flies forward (2) represents the Akan belief that "the past illuminates the present" (3) and that one must recognize and appreciate the past while planning for the future (4). The egg at once symbolizes the wisdom of the past and the future generation that will benefit from it (5).

As CGLA prepares to celebrate its 40th anniversary in 2013, CGLA Intern Cynthia Cornelius, a third-year law student at [Loyola University Chicago School of Law](#), interviewed [Chuck Hogren](#), CGLA's co-founder and first executive director, "to look back and get" Chuck's wisdom and his thoughts about CGLA's future.

CC: Your early days at CGLA are chronicled in a book titled *The Reluctant Defender*, which suggests that the birth of CGLA was a defining moment in your life that you initially resisted. Why were you reluctant to take on this assignment?

CH: Bill Leslie, the pastor at [LaSalle Street Church](#), strongly felt that the church should do this ministry. We knew there was a great need based on the number of calls that came in to the church from parents asking for help for their children who had been arrested.

At the time, the church was studying and praying about God's expectations of us in seeking justice for the poor. We read hundreds of Bible verses referencing justice, like Proverbs 31:8-9, which says, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed. Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless, and see that they get justice." (NLT)

Our church was located right there in a neighborhood that needed justice. The Bible almost demanded that we do it. But, most of the requests were for criminal defense. Although I had been practicing law for ten years, my specialties were probate and real estate law. I was reluctant to engage this work on a large scale primarily because I had no actual experience in criminal law.

CC: The book describes some early experiences that show you had the heart of a defender at a fairly young age. How did these experiences influence your decision to become a lawyer?

CH: My parents suggested I consider becoming a lawyer when I was about 12 years old.



Top: CGLA Co-Founder, Chuck Hogren. Bottom: The symbol for the African word, "Sankofa"

1) Dee Galloway, *Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Denver, African Traditions, Proverbs, and Sankofa*, found at <http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Literature/sankofa.cfm>.

2) Image from *Southern Illinois University: Afrikana Studies*, found at <http://www.africanastudies.siuc.edu/>

3) Galloway, *supra* note 1.

4) *Southern Illinois University, supra* note 2.

5) Galloway, *supra* note 1.

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They weren't lawyers, and they didn't really know much about the practice of law. They just thought law school would give me a good education and good "training" to work in a respectable profession.

I was in sixth grade in Western Springs public schools about that time, and I guess I took my parents' suggestion to heart when I saw my fellow students being treated unfairly. The superintendent really emphasized spelling, and he implemented strict rules governing written spelling tests. If we erased or marked over a letter, the word would be marked as incorrect. Everyone knew the rule: No second thoughts; get it right the first time. I felt that some students had been wrongly accused of erasing. The teacher assumed any smudge on the paper was due to an erasure. But those smudges most often came from dirty fingers!

I saw an opportunity to help my classmates who wouldn't or couldn't speak up for themselves. I felt I had to step in because the rules were ridiculously rigid. Plus, I thought I could make a little money by charging for my services. If I successfully negotiated with the teacher to increase the grade, I charged two cents. I think I might have made four cents in all, but it was fun.

I guess that really was my first experience as a defender, and now that I look back on it, I have to credit my parents with having planted that seed in me.

CC: When Bill Leslie approached you about opening a legal clinic, did you ever consider turning down the offer, or suggesting that someone else do it?

CH: Well, Bill asked me to do it just for one year and only if they could raise the money. I truly never thought Bill would raise the money. Our church was struggling financially. Bill was only making \$100 per week, and I don't think he always got paid on time. So, I thought I was fairly safe. But, Bill came back within two weeks and said he had raised the money. I learned later that Ken and Margaret Taylor, owners of [Tyndale House Publishers](#), funded the first eighteen months.

Plus, I couldn't turn my back on the kids I was working with. Our ministry had grown to serve more than 70 youth who participated in our recreation and tutoring programs. I even played pool with some of them. I would hear so many stories about kids being arrested when they "hadn't done anything." I wasn't sure how accurate their stories were, but hearing so many stories made me feel like they deserved a closer look.

We also witnessed other injustices in the neighborhood. For instance, A&P, the neighborhood grocery store, would bring in wilted produce from the suburbs to sell at regular prices to [Cabrini Green](#) residents. Also, around 1960, a developer bought some tenements near the church. He wanted to tear them down, so he forestalled protests to his plan by promising the former tenants they would have first choice of units in the new buildings. Most of the residents had migrated to Chicago from Appalachia, and many of them attended [LaSalle Street Church](#). The developer built the new buildings and promptly reneged on his oral promise, having carefully avoided putting anything in writing. Not one of the former tenants got an apartment. Then there was the "Green" portion of the [Cabrini Green](#) complex. The buildings there were poorly built, plumbing problems were persistent, and elevators often malfunctioned.

Fifteen thousand residents legally lived in the one square mile that formed the housing complex, and probably another 5,000 lived there "unofficially." It was a small city, and the people were suffering. The church just could not ignore the injustices that were all around it. I couldn't, either.

CC: You speak Bill Leslie's name with great reverence. What did you admire most about him?

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CH: Bill Leslie was a pioneer in urban ministry. Unlike many other evangelical ministers, Bill did not flee the city for the suburbs. He was probably one of the first, if not the first, Caucasian minister to combine social justice with a pietistic approach to the gospels.

Bill was the inspiration behind other social programs at the church. We ministered to senior citizens; we had a counseling center; we ran a remedial reading program and a bookstore. Most of these programs were spun off from the church and are still thriving as independent entities, even though Bill has been gone for many years.

Bill encouraged people in the church to try new ideas, and he was willing to back them up. He was a mentor for so many people. We were blessed to have his leadership for 29 years. He left a powerful legacy, and that's partly why I have been a member at [LaSalle Street Church](#) for almost 50 years.

CC: When your one-year commitment ended, why didn't you return to your real estate practice?

There's a long-running myth that I walked away from a lucrative and promising career. That's simply not true. My real estate practice paid the bills, but it was a far cry from being lucrative. Nor was real estate law very satisfying, now that I think about it. I was a business major in college, so when I started law school, I thought international business law would be interesting, and the idea of international travel was enticing. Real estate law wasn't international business law, and that is what I had studied and what I had hoped to do.

By the end of the year, I found the work more satisfying than any other legal work I had done, and I felt I was doing what the Bible had commanded. I was speaking up for the poor and needy and helping them find justice. I didn't want to go back to what I was doing before, so I agreed to stay on. I was representing tenants, not landlords, employees, not employers. I felt I was on the right side. By the grace of God, it all worked out.

CC: As CGLA expanded its services and its reach, you had to expand your responsibilities, too. How did you handle your changing role?

CH: When I first started, I was the only lawyer, and I had a paid, part-time secretary. Later, I successfully applied for a grant and hired a lawyer for juvenile matters. Law students have always been an important part of the program. There were a few paid positions but most of the students were volunteers.

My role started changing after about 18 months. Bill had raised enough money to last that long, so it was up to me to keep it going. We operated as a part of the church initially, but when Bill felt like our wings were strong enough for us to fly on our own, he pushed us out of the nest and we incorporated as a nonprofit. The church continued to provide a lot of financial support. Bill would allow me to solicit donations from the congregation by making presentations during "Ministry Minutes," and then he would take up a special offering.

As more grants came in, through the efforts of the Board of Directors, I hired additional lawyers who bit by bit took pieces of the criminal work that I was doing. I gave up felony cases first, then misdemeanor cases, and finally some of the juvenile cases. I eventually hired a director of development to focus on grants and fundraising, but I would still make direct calls to donors. The new role wasn't a problem for me because I felt the story of CGLA was compelling, and I loved telling it.

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When I retired after 24 years, I was working mainly on juvenile court issues, usually trying to help mothers, who had been arrested on drug charges, obtain rehabilitation, and keep custody of their children.

I had a truly outstanding, high quality staff of attorneys, law students and support staff, some of whom have gone on to win awards and other recognition. On one of our murder cases, for instance, one staff attorney managed to hire the forensic expert who had performed President John Kennedy's autopsy. Another attorney found a handwriting expert that proved a CGLA client had forged another person's name on an emergency room admission form and, therefore, could not have been at the scene of a crime.

I found great satisfaction in seeing young, novice lawyers who were staunch public servants transform into excellent practitioners.

CC: You led CGLA for 24 years before retiring. But, you are still working, and you're still involved in CGLA. How satisfying is your current work and your new role at CGLA?

CH: My "day job" is at [Mosher and Wagenmaker, LLC](#), a law firm specializing in representing nonprofit organizations in various legal matters. I enjoy my work, and it keeps me connected to the nonprofit community. I have observed that some founders of nonprofit organizations suffer from a condition called "founder's syndrome." They don't want to let go, meddling and interfering in their nonprofit's affairs long after their departure from positions of leadership.

CGLA has continued to thrive without me, and I don't want to interfere with that progress. I currently serve on CGLA's [advisory board](#), which requires me to attend three meetings each year, and I do special tasks as requested. If I see someone who would be a good supporter of CGLA, I will approach them and give my testimonial about why they should get involved. In addition, CGLA maintains a close relationship with [LaSalle Street Church](#), and I am still active in the church. My level of involvement with CGLA so far has been sufficient to keep founder's syndrome at bay.

CC: What core spiritual principles have guided your life?

CH: My grandparents and my parents were strong Christians, always very active in their churches. Their values and Biblical teachings are in my DNA. I stay spiritually grounded in the knowledge that Jesus died for my sins and by serving Christ as I am led to do.

CC: You had a heart attack on November 28th. How did this health scare affect your perspective and your plans for the future?

CH: My doctors said it was mild, as heart attacks go. I had four stents placed in my arteries; I was in the hospital for six days; and I stayed with relatives for five days. The doctors told me I will resume a normal life and that I am NOT an invalid. So, I set my intention not to adopt the mindset of an invalid. In fact, I am back at work, and I even represented a client in an administrative hearing on December 15th.

I am participating in a 12-week cardiac rehabilitation program at [Northwestern Memorial Hospital](#).

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CC: How did the book *The Reluctant Defender* come about?

CH: CGLA had been in operation for about four years when the idea came up at a meeting of our Board of Directors. The author, [David Claerbaut](#), was Chairman of the Board of Directors.

He had authored other books and thought a book about CGLA could be a perpetual fundraiser (6). [Tyndale](#) printed 15,000 books, but sold only 5,000. Now my sister tells me the book can be purchased for 99 cents on [Amazon](#) and [addall.com](#). So, I guess it wasn't much of a fundraiser. But, it does memorialize what the neighborhood was like so we don't forget.

CC: Why is it important that we not forget?

CH: [Cabrini Green Legal Aid](#) is still relevant even though the [Cabrini Green](#) public housing complex no longer exists, except for the row houses. The same kind of oppression that we fought in the 1970s is still happening, and new challenges are on the rise. I am pleased that CGLA now serves clients city wide, and staffs three satellite offices in addition to the main office on Milwaukee Avenue.

CC: What is your vision for CGLA?

CH: As I said earlier, I am on the CGLA's [Advisory Board](#), and I will offer my opinions and advice about various strategies the leadership plans to undertake, and I try not to impose my own ideas, lest I succumb to "founder's syndrome." However, if I could wave a magic wand and give CGLA unlimited resources, I would ask CGLA to consider adding a consumer protection unit.

The need is great. Local newspapers are full of stories about people who are being cheated by banks, by contractors doing shoddy work, and by people pretending to help them save their homes from foreclosure. Seniors are the most vulnerable. These consumer issues are becoming far too common, and low-income consumers have little recourse. I know CGLA can help them, and I hope one day it will be in a position to do so.

In the meantime, this "Reluctant Defender" has stepped up to fill the consumer protection void. He recently helped three homeowners work to try to save their homes from mortgage foreclosure.

CGLA approaches its 40th anniversary like a Sankofa bird, proudly carrying Chuck Hogren's wisdom and tireless legacy of selfless service into the future as it fulfills its mission to seek justice and mercy for "those who cannot speak for themselves."

6) Note: As of January 2, 2012, new copies of *The Reluctant Defender* are currently available on Amazon.com for \$55.37. Used copies list for \$2.79, and collectible copies for \$9.94.

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