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December 17, 1984 ▪ Vol. 22 ▪ No. 25

## Rosemary Furman Fights to Bring Justice to All at a Price All—Except Lawyers—Can Afford

By Laurel Tielis

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Sweetie, I'll give you a good tip," Rosemary Furman tells the waitress who's wiping up a glass of water Furman just spilled. "You already gave me the best tip I ever got," the woman replies. "You're Rosemary Furman, aren't you? You got my husband his divorce. We've been married five years now and have a 15-month-old." When the waitress leaves the table, a chubby young blonde comes over and says, "I just want you to know I'm behind you all the way." Later a black woman throws her arms around the 5'4" Furman and urges, "Keep it up!"

The 58-year-old legal secretary from Jacksonville, Fla. already has shown uncommon tenacity. For seven years she has fought the courts and the state bar association for the right to offer low-cost assistance in routine legal matters to people who can't afford lawyers. "The justice system should be called the injustice

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system," declares Furman. Until recently it seemed as if her one-woman campaign for equal justice would land her in prison. Last April the Florida Supreme Court sentenced her to 30 days in jail after she refused to close her business, which charged clients \$50 to type legal forms for such simple proceedings as uncontested divorces, adoptions and name changes—services for which lawyers often charge \$350 to \$1,500. In October the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear her appeal of her conviction for practicing law without a license. But on Nov. 27 Florida Gov. Bob Graham decided to excuse her jail term. "For millions of people, Rosemary Furman stands for the idea that you shouldn't have to pay a fortune for a simple legal matter," says Graham. "Her case has raised the fundamental right of access to the courts. I don't think we've heard the last of her."

No, sir. U.S. District Court Judge Howell W. Melton recently ruled that two of Furman's clients can press a class-action suit against the Florida Supreme Court and the Florida Bar charging that they are denying justice to people who can't afford legal fees. "Now they've got Pandora's box opened," says Furman. "If we win, we will cut the legs off the Bar."

A victory would give Furman the final triumph in a battle that began years ago. After helping to establish Hubbard House in 1972, a refuge for battered wives, Furman, who had worked 22 years as a court stenographer, began quietly doing legal paperwork for women whose sole protection from their abusive husbands lay in divorce. When Furman came to the defense of another woman who faced prosecution for performing similar services, the state bar retaliated in 1977. "It was an all-out war," says Furman. "They were harassing me unmercifully."

The Florida Bar wanted Furman prosecuted on indirect criminal contempt and jailed. "She has a basic disdain for the courts, lawyers and judges," says Bar President Gerald Richman. " 'People don't really need the law' is her attitude. Everything our country is founded on she doesn't believe in. She's found a way to make a fast buck and make it look as if she's helping poor people." But Jacksonville Circuit Court Supervisor C. Wendell Martin says in Furman's defense that "lawyers rarely prepare and type up papers. That's all done by secretaries. As far as I can see, her work is just as good as anybody's."

Widowed, the mother of three and the grandmother of seven, Furman hardly seems to have prospered from her controversial business. Home is a brown, cement-block house/ office near an interstate in Jacksonville, and her car is a brown 1978 Toyota. Lawyers think she's making a lot of money, she says, because "five women are doing secretarial work under my name. I deliberately selected

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LAST UPDATE: Sunday July 25, 2010 07:10PM EDT

PEOPLE Top 5 are the most-viewed stories on the site over the past three days, updated every 60 minutes

women who were mothers of young children and who had no husbands."

Furman's clients can't praise her enough. Says Carol Propper, who, with the help of Furman's paperwork, obtained a divorce that gave her the house, the car, the kids and \$25 per child per week, "I can't think of anything she's done that's detrimental to anyone except to the big-buck lawyers."

Furman is fond of saying, "I was accused by lawyers, tried by lawyers and ultimately judged by lawyers," but she was also defended by one—Washington attorney Alan Morrison, a former Ralph Nader assistant and consumer advocate with the Public Citizen Litigation Group. Now that Warner Bros, has optioned the movie rights to her story for TV, Furman figures her case will be judged by the American people sometime next season. Jean Stapleton is supposed to play Furman, who will get \$1,000 a week to consult on the film. She also plans a book, tentatively titled The Decline and Fall of America, drawing on one of her favorite quotes: "The decline and fall of every nation begins with the decay of its justice system." Of her long battle with that system, Furman says, "It's exhausting to deal with professional liars—40,000 of them against one of you." But she vows, "I will keep this fight up as long as I last."

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