

Attorney Escaped The Holocaust, Changed Eastern Kentucky

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PRESTONSBURG, Ky. (AP) — Far from his soon-to-be home in Prestonsburg, a Jewish attorney and Holocaust survivor got a phone call that would change Eastern Kentucky forever.

It was the summer of 1970.

John Rosenberg and his wife, Jean, had recently decided to leave their careers at the U.S. Department of Justice, and opted for a road trip.

They loaded a Peugeot with a tent and a baby carriage for their 3-month-old son, and drove north.

The trip lasted months. From their home in Washington D.C., they cruised through Canada's park system along the Bay of Fundy, into Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.

Then, one day, Rosenberg got the call. It would set him on a path to become one of the most influential attorneys and public servants in Eastern Kentucky.

He talked with Terry Lenzer, a Department of Justice attorney who worked with Rosenberg on a number of prominent civil rights cases. Lenzer told Rosenberg to visit Eastern Kentucky, where a group of attorneys based in Charleston, West Virginia, were hoping to expand their legal service.

So he did.

He visited Prestonsburg, where he would soon move and open his own free legal aid office called the Appalachian Research and Defense Fund (AppalReD).

Rosenberg's free legal aid service now has six offices throughout Eastern Kentucky and has brought legal representation to thousands of the region's poorest residents.

As an attorney, he worked on cases and projects that helped pass a constitutional amendment outlawing the use of broad form deeds, which for decades allowed coal companies to strip mine the property of landowners without their consent.

Rosenberg, now 87, also helped establish the Appalachian Citizens' Law Center, a nonprofit law firm in Whitesburg that has helped thousands of former miners and widows seeking black lung benefits.

"He is absolutely irreplaceable," said Ned Pillersdorf, a Prestonsburg attorney who first met Rosenberg 38 years ago. "I shudder the day when he's gone. Where would the less fortunate be without him, and where will they be when he's gone?"

Rosenberg's resume lists his involvement, either as a founder or a board member, of countless nonprofits and legal associations. Within the legal community, he is known as a champion of providing legal aid services for the poor, and has campaigned for their state and federal funding for years.

AppalReD has provided free legal representation and advice to thousands of people as they fought for housing, social services and freedom from domestic violence.

Tony Oppegard, a Lexington attorney who worked for AppalReD for about 18 years on coal mine safety and safety discrimination cases, recalled a case in the mid-1980s when a family's home was destroyed by a boulder knocked loose by a strip mine operation on the mountain above their house.

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