

# The Natal Law Society

## Reaching Out to Deliver Library and Other Services

In terms of Section 58 of the Attorneys Act, the objectives of the Natal Law Society include the upholding, improvement and control of the professional conduct of members. Other aims of the Society are to regulate the exercise of the attorneys' profession in KwaZulu-Natal, to encourage efficiency and responsibility in the profession, and to maintain and enhance the prestige and dignity of the profession.

However, many of the Society's functions have remained obscure ; even within the profession the Law Society is seen largely as a disciplinary body. In reality this is but one of many roles performed by the Society and, even then, only 40% of the 1 800 complaints received annually warrant official enquiries.

Considerations that have been given high priority include

- demystifying the image of the Society and the profession,
- improving the channels of communication,
- and sharing knowledge more effectively.

These goals led to the development of our **Reach Out Programme**, aimed

- primarily at NLS members,
- secondly at the legal fraternity (advocates, members of the Department of Justice including State Attorneys and magistrates, as well as others in government departments such as the Surveyor-General, the academic world and attorneys practising in other regions), and
- thirdly, the public in general.

As far as the public is concerned, attorneys must be seen to be more accessible. Turning to the legal profession, in order to improve service to clients, attorneys require accurate information from which to make decisions, and one of our goals has been to improve the quality of access to information. Our two libraries contain valuable resources and form an integral part of the overall development involving the dissemination of information.

Specific factors that needed to be resolved in our province were that 35% of our 2 000 members are not within reasonable distance of our physical resources in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, and practitioners who were previously disadvantaged need to have ready access to these resources too.

1. **The Internet** has proved to be the most viable medium for resolving these issues. The Natal Law Society has two websites ([www.lawsoc.co.za](http://www.lawsoc.co.za) and [www.lawlibrary.co.za](http://www.lawlibrary.co.za)) which were originally designed by E-Pages of Durban following specifications laid down by Gavin McLachlan ([gjm@randles.co.za](mailto:gjm@randles.co.za)) on behalf of the NLS. The are now entirely maintained, updated and developed within the Society by Mary Bruce ([mary@lawlibrary.co.za](mailto:mary@lawlibrary.co.za)). The sites are dynamic resources in their own right as they are updated daily and constantly adapt to the needs, perceived and reported, of our members. As an indication of the activity taking place on these sites, since we took over their administration in September/October 1999, the parent site has grown from fifty to over five hundred and sixty pages. Last month the library site registered over twenty-five thousand hits.
  
2. The NLS has been able to **expand the services available to members**, generally without charge.
  - Library bulletins which include details of recent acquisitions, journal articles of particular interest, references to government gazettes, and hyperlinks to recent judgments available on the Internet, are compiled weekly and attached to the Electronic Library's notice board ([www.lawlibrary.co.za/notice/index.htm](http://www.lawlibrary.co.za/notice/index.htm)). Material is contributed by librarians in both libraries and the Information Systems Manager.
  - Court rolls for the High Courts in Durban and Pietermaritzburg are added to the same notice board daily. This particular exercise is no mean feat as, until the Department of Justice's E-Justice project reaches these courts, acquiring the rolls has become a co-operative venture involving a number of people who are prepared to collect the rolls from the courts and fax them through to us, after which they are converted into electronic format and distributed. Both the bulletins and court rolls are also emailed directly to members on request, as soon as they become available.
  - Introductory courses to both websites, the Internet, and the use of e-mail are offered to members and their staff at no cost.
  - Guides encompassing the material discussed at these training sessions are available in hardcopy and in electronic format via our websites.
  - Through the generosity of Butterworths, which hosts both these sites free of charge, we are able to offer members free mini-websites within ours.
  - We have been involved in the development of a Legal Resources Network which has made vast quantities of information readily available and from which our members benefit directly (more on this initiative may be found on [www.lawlibrary.co.za](http://www.lawlibrary.co.za) ).
  - The Surveyor-General in Pietermaritzburg has recently agreed to make diagrams and other resources available electronically to NLS members at minimal cost.
  - The Master's Office is also working closely with us and both institutions have websites developed within ours. There are at present no restricted areas on either of our sites, which means that all can benefit from the free flow of information.

3. To create awareness of the websites and the expanded services, and to encourage members who do not already have access to the Internet to become connected, a series of **Open Days** is being held around the province. Companies who provide services or products of interest to the legal profession are also represented at these events. The response has been very positive, to the extent that it was decided last week to make these occasions an ongoing feature to continually keep members up-to-date with developments.
4. The NLS has developed close **working partnerships** with relevant companies, among whom are Butterworths, Canon and Korbitec. Our members have benefited from direct access to product information, and we are currently working on various projects such as fully interactive data forms and electronic data storage and management for the benefit of our members.
5. In order to make these benefits available to our members, including the previously disadvantaged, as equitably as possible, we are about to establish six **computer workstations** around the province. Butterworths has sponsored six licenses for a variety of its products, two weeks ago Korbitec donated three packages, each comprising a PC, printer and select software to this cause, and we are currently negotiating with other members of the business community who wish to participate in making essential information accessible to communities which have previously been isolated.

Much of what has been said this afternoon is elaborated upon within our websites and we encourage all to avail themselves of the information available through this medium. We welcome comments and suggestions.

Particular credit is due to Gavin McLachlan ([gjm@randles.co.za](mailto:gjm@randles.co.za)), an attorney practising in Pietermaritzburg who acts as IT consultant to the Natal Law Society and who is the driving force behind these developments along with David Gush ([gush@swt.co.za](mailto:gush@swt.co.za)), chairman of the NLS' Information Technology Committee and Cassim Sardiwalla ([caslaw@intekom.co.za](mailto:caslaw@intekom.co.za)).