

## Part of the process

By Martin Cizmar

The walls are plastered with brochures offering advice on lease agreements and tarjetas de credito. Sitting on the frayed blue chairs in the lobby it's hard not playing footsie with someone or something. And if you think this is cramped, it's nothing, says Grant Penrod.

"Wait until you see the upstairs, it's even better," he says, climbing a narrow staircase to his cozy office in the Blue Ridge Legal Services building on High Street.

Penrod, 32, has been a staff attorney at BRLS for only about nine months, but he's already got his office thoroughly decorated. On his bookshelf, more than a dozen Simpsons action figures keep his

casebooks company. His computer's background is dedicated to punk band Rocket From The Crypt. On his desk: a Family Dollar-brand diet cola, the Daily News-Record's classified section and a bumper sticker with a picture of the President and the slogan "American Errorist."

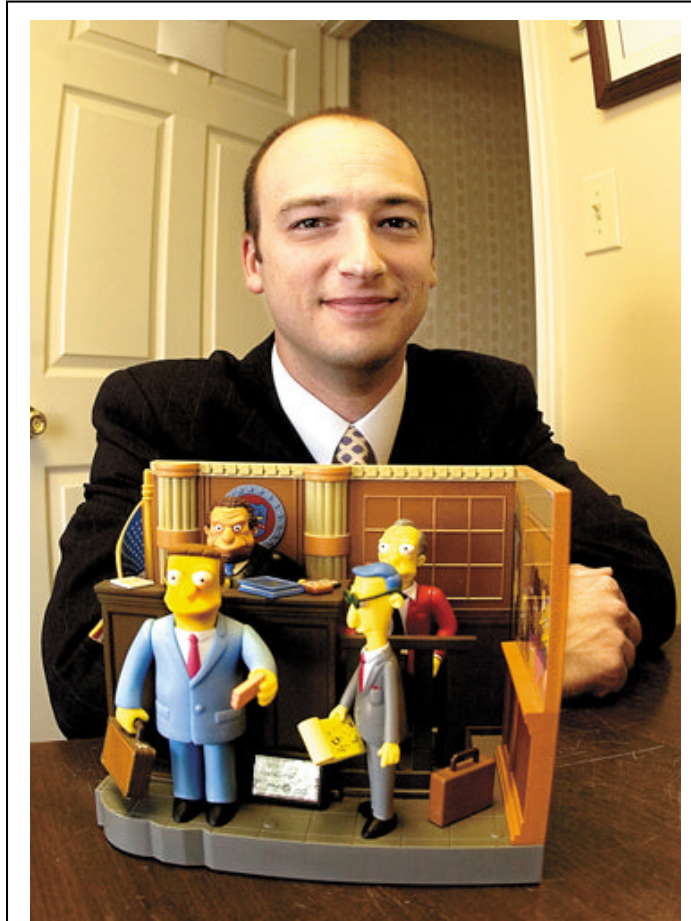
It's humble, and it's just where Penrod wants to be. If it weren't he'd be out the door — it's not like he doesn't have options.

After graduating from James Madison University, he was a Pizza Hut manager. He could still be there, making a lot more money and without \$100,000 in school loans hanging over his head. Since he went to law school at the University of Virginia, and since his dad is a partner in one of Harrisonburg's more prominent law firms, it's a safe bet he could do even better than becoming a pizza mogul.

His reasons for being here are just what you'd expect from a legal aid attorney.

"The legal system affects everybody but so few of us can navigate it," he said. "Access to justice shouldn't be predicated on being able to pay for it."

As a JMU student, Penrod was involved with various social causes. That faded when he got out of school and started working. He missed it, so he decided to go to law school and get an education that would help him make a difference again.



**An avid Simpsons fan, Grant Penrod turned to the law after a stint in the business world.**

Thomas J. Turney

Looking back, he thinks he might have been interested even before that. When he was in high school his dad served as a court-appointed defense attorney in a high profile capital murder case.

"People were coming up to me saying 'Why's your dad doing this?' so I asked him, and he said 'Everyone deserves a fair trial.' "

It left an impression on him. That idea — that everyone deserves legal representation — is what drives him today.

Most of the cases Penrod handles at BRLS aren't so dramatic, but just as thankless. Family law issues (divorces, marriages, custody and the like) are his biggest request, followed closely by landlord-tenant problems. He handles a little of everything, Penrod says, and that's a lot. He gets about 12 new clients a week, sometimes adding up to as many as 90 at a time.

Lots of clients means lots of thinking on his feet. Sometimes he goes into court without seeing any documents and only knowing the client's side of the story. Sometimes, he's dealing with legal issues he knows very little about and doesn't have time to thoroughly research. That's all part of the fun, says Penrod — it's either sink or swim.

"If you can swim, it's a good thing to do," he said.

One thing Penrod's picked up in his nine months as a legal aid attorney is that even if his clients don't know much about the law, they know a fair result when they see it. "Most people have a very innate sense of justice," he said.

Penrod is just happy to be part of the process — helping the little guys.

"I don't go to bed at night wondering if I'm doing the right thing," he said.

"I sleep well."