Meeting focuses on consumer law rights
By Deisy Enriquez

The People’s Law School, hosted by the UH Center for Consumer Law, held one of its biannual sessions on Saturday, drawing in over 500 people eager to learn about different laws regarding everything from bankruptcy to health insurance to immigration.

Associate Dean of the Law Center Richard Alderman started The People’s Law School over 25 years ago to educate people about the laws and their rights. Since then, over 50,000 people have attended the classes.

“I didn’t think that law was just for lawyers,” said Alderman. “I thought it was really important that people be able to help themselves.”

Alderman, who began teaching consumer law at UH in 1973, realized that many people had misconceptions about the law, and as a result were either being taken advantage of, or assuming they were entitled to something when they really weren’t.

In order to clear up common misunderstandings of the law and reach out to the public, Alderman started a newspaper column called “Know Your Rights” in 1979, which is the same name he has continued to use for books and television appearances since.

“This is something that once you know your rights, from that point on you can protect yourself,” Alderman said. “Whether it’s dealing with a bank, a landlord, car dealer, or even neighbors — if you don’t know your rights, you screw up.”

There are fourteen available classes, free to anyone who registers online, that are taught by lawyers, judges, and law professors who volunteer for the event.

Representatives from the Houston Bar Association and Texas Consumer Complaint Center were also available to provide information and answer questions for attendants.

“To be honest, it’s all about money. This is not an academic endeavor,” Alderman said. “This is all about making sure that when you are in the marketplace … you get what you’re entitled to.”

Since the recession in 2008, interest in financial classes such as credit and debt collection, bankruptcy, and employment has increased because people have lost jobs and taken on large
amounts of debt that they were unable to pay. People from all classes and socioeconomic levels are facing the same struggles.

“The whole economy has been hurt by the bankruptcy stuff. People are out on the streets and it’s just a sad situation,” said Lillian Jollifee, who attended The People’s Law School. “Because of the change in the laws, I want to protect not only myself as a consumer, but also my family. Something like this (event) is a great opportunity to pick up a little information to help you later if you face some of these problems.”

Alderman has taken The People’s Law School to other cities around Texas such as San Antonio, Amarillo, and Laredo.

“What we try do with other cities is get groups that want to take over and do this,” said Alderman. “I also work with other schools and states to see they will do People’s Law Schools of their own because law becomes more and more complex, lawyers get expensive, and people just have to (be able to) do more for themselves.”