

Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A

BUILDING COMMUNITIES
ENSURING OPPORTUNITY
ACHIEVING JUSTICE

SUMMER 2014



Advancing Justice, In and Out of Courtroom

By Shekar Krishnan and Devin Corrigan



THIS SUMMER WAS A BUSY time for Brooklyn A's Preserving Affordable Housing Group Representation Unit. The Unit won a number of important cases for Brooklyn A clients, advancing our mission to protect affordable housing in our city.

Staff attorney and Skadden Fellow, Adam Meyers, won a case concerning succession rights to an affordable coop at Lindsay Park. The NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) and Lindsay Park had attempted to evict our

client on the basis that she did not qualify for succession rights to the apartment in which she lived. They initially determined that our client, as the goddaughter of the deceased tenant record, was not an eligible family member. Adam, and (initially former fellow Lynn Horowitz) challenged this determination. In a well-written and expansive decision, the court found that

our client did in fact qualify for succession rights and that although (HPD) was behind in the times in not considering a goddaughter an eligible family member, our client had demonstrated the required emotional and financial interdependence. This decision is important for not only Brooklyn A's client, but also in ensuring that the law adequately protects families who live in affordable housing.

In another case, staff attorney, Gregory Louis had some major developments represented a group of dis-

sident shareholders at Lindsay Park in Williamsburg, challenging board corruption and serious mismanagement. Brooklyn A rallied with our clients to call attention to their concerns and petition for a change in the co-op bylaws and voting procedures. Council Member Antonio Reynoso (NYC District 34) and Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez (NY's 7th Congressional District) are firmly supporting and actively participating in this effort. From the loud cheers and applause when Greg spoke, one could see just how energized, inspired, and grateful his clients were for all the work he has done for them. Our rally fired up us and our clients to press forward!

Finally, Group Representation Unit Director, Shekar Krishnan, and Co-Executive Director, Martin Needelman, guest lectured Urban Planning Graduate Students at the Pratt Center for Community and Environmental Development. The topic of their presentation was the intersection of fair housing, community organizing, and urban planning in Brooklyn A's Broadway Triangle case. Pratt students represent the next generation of urban planning experts and policy makers in our city. By serving as mentors and allies to them, Brooklyn A advance mission of social and economic justice for years to come. ■

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New Staff at Brooklyn A

Help us welcome these great new additions to our staff!



SHEKAR KRISHNAN Program Director, Preserving Affordable Housing, Group Representation Unit

Shekar Krishnan began his career in Brooklyn A's the Group Representation Unit, leading our Broadway Triangle fair housing case against the City of New York. He was then an associate at Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP and Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler LLP, serving as pro bono counsel and as a member of our board. In rejoining Brooklyn A, Shekar will lead our Group Representation Unit's fair housing litigation

and community-based advocacy on behalf of tenant and neighborhood groups in North Brooklyn. Prior to Brooklyn A, Shekar clerked for Senior United States District Court Judge Jack B. Weinstein in the Eastern District of New York. He received his law degree from the University of Michigan Law School, where he was a Clarence Darrow Scholar and contributing editor of the Michigan Law Review. He received his undergraduate degree from Cooper Union.

STEPHAN PETRYCKA

Legal Services Coordinator, Preserving Affordable Housing Group Representation Unit, AmeriCorps VISTA

Stephan graduated from SUNY New Paltz with a BA in Political Science in 2014. He also studied with Bard College and Charles University in Prague. He has interned with the World Affairs Council of the Mid-Hudson Valley, the New Paltz Village Board, WITNESS and the Point Foundation. As an intern for the New Paltz Village Board, he encoded legislation into local law to encourage sustainable development in the form of permeable pavement. In 2013, Stephan completed his first AmeriCorps service term with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Stephan intends to pursue a career in urban planning.



VINCENT DURAN

Legal Services Coordinator, Preserving Affordable Housing, Individual Representation Unit, AmeriCorps VISTA

Vincent comes to Brooklyn A having spent the past year as an AmeriCorps NCCC FEMA Corps Member; where he worked in a variety of capacities, including on the FEMA Helpline, and served in Maryland, Texas, and Missouri. He received his BA in Economics, along with a Minor in Engineering, from Lehigh University in 2012, and spent a semester abroad studying Positive Psychology in Copenhagen. Vincent intends to pursue a Master's in Economic Development.

Thank you to all of our wonderful summer interns.

ISABEL ABREU
University of Pennsylvania Law School

ALYSSA BALDASSINI
Brooklyn Law School

MICHAEL DOHMANN
Cornell University

MOSHE INDIG
New York University School of Law

STEVEN KOCH
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JACK UNDERWOOD
Boston University School of Law

GARY WAN
Cornell University

CATHERINE WANG
Cornell University

JOHN S. WILLUMSEN-FRIEDMAN
Brooklyn Law School

New Staff



DEVIN CORRIGAN

Development & Communications Coordinator, AmeriCorps VISTA

Devin received her B.A. in Political Science from UNC Asheville in 2013. She served the past year as a VISTA at homeless shelter in Greensboro, North Carolina. She has previously interned Just Economics WNC, working to pass living wage legislation in Asheville, NC. She enjoys long-distance running, baking, and making lists.



CHRISTINA BERNARDO, ESQ.

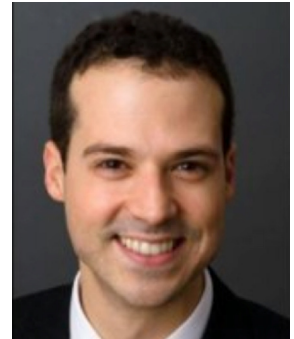
Brooklyn Law School Fellow, Preserving Affordable Housing Program, Group Representation Unit

Christina rejoins the Group Representation Unit as a Brooklyn Law. She had previously worked with the Unit as a Summer Legal Intern in 2013. Christina has also served as an intern with the Safe Harbor Project, District 38 New York City Councilmember Carlos Manchaca, NYC Dept. of Housing Real Estate Division. She received her J.D. from Brooklyn Law School in 2014 and a B.A. in Political Science from Villanova in 2009.

PAUL R. RODRÍGUEZ, ESQ.

Staff Attorney, Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP Extern, Community and Economic Development Program

Paul is an extern from Simpson Thatcher & Bartlett LLP. He is a 2011 graduate of Yale Law School, where he was a member of the Community and Economic Development clinic, served as chair of Yale Law Social Entrepreneurs and editor of the Yale Human Rights & Development Law Journal. He was the 2011-2012 Law and Social Enterprise Fellow at NYU School of Law and is a 2014 Council of Urban Professional Fellow. Prior to attending law school, Paul served as a U.S. Senate Staffer for four years.



Save the Date

Annual Partnership Awards Benefit

Wednesday, November 19, 2014
6PM

Weylin B. Seymour's

Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A Honors

JUDGE HAROLD TYLER AWARD
Judah Gribetz
Bingham McCutchen

SARGENT SHRIVER AWARD
Paloma Hernandez
President & CEO, Urban Health Plan

DENIS BERGER AWARD
Sonya D. Johnson
Senior Counsel, nationalgrid

GUEST SPEAKER
James R. Silkenat
President, American Bar Association
Sullivan & Worcester LLP



Navigating the System

by Nicole Mormilo

THERE'S A SAD FEELING OF helplessness that clings to the walls of the Kings County Housing Court. The courtroom is filled with people waiting to appear before a judge to resolve critical health and safety conditions or violations in their home, to regain basic needs like lack of heat or hot water, or to prevent possible evictions. Because of limited financial resources, ninety percent of the tenants present in Housing Court represent themselves. Most tenants have no legal skills or knowledge, which makes winning suits very difficult. On the other hand, landlords are able to use their financial resources to hire seasoned attorneys with enormous experience and expertise. This translates in to an overwhelming advantage in Housing Court.

One of the first families I represented at Brooklyn A, was, in many ways, typical of many Brooklyn A clients. The father works two jobs to support his family. The mother works, too, while learning English. This family had been in and out of Housing Court on two cases: a rent overcharge case and a health and safety case due to the mold on the radiators, cockroaches throughout the apartment and no ventilation in the bathroom. The repeated court appearances and public assistance meetings meant lost work for both parents. Eventually, this cost the mother her job and the father one of his jobs. By the time this family came to Brooklyn A, they had been through housing court several times, were not

receiving public assistance, had significant rent arrears and had been denied emergency "One Shot Deal" cash assistance from the NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA).

After the first few weeks of my internship with Brooklyn A, I worked exclusively with this family. It quickly became evident that, through their case, I would be getting an intimate look at the interplay between the legal system and the administrations created to provide services to low-income and needy families within NYC. As I tried to define countless governmental acronyms and piece together all the components of welfare applications, it was hard to imagine applying for assistance without any guidance. I contacted local community based organizations (CBOs) for funds to help reduce rental arrears, communicated with their extended family to act as third party contributors and put together a reconsideration packet for their "One Shot Deal" application. After countless preparatory hours, we submitted materials directly to directors at the HRA. Unfortunately, we were told to reapply for assistance and began the process (and paperwork) all over again.

After lots of hard work, we received word from HRA that Brooklyn A's clients would be receiving \$10,500.50 to pay off their rental arrears. I received word the day before my birthday and was ecstatic; this was the best birthday present I could have asked for! After reality had set in,

however, I was aggravated. If this family had not been working with Brooklyn A, there is no way they would have received the rental arrears assistance they desperately needed and were qualified for. Although many agencies strive to aid low-income individuals, the process by which support is administered out is not always effective or efficient. While I am completely aware of the reality that HRA has a very high volume of cases, it was frustrating to have to explain to my client that the administration had denied her family public assistance, yet had no concrete explanation for that denial.

Without Brooklyn A's assistance and direction, this family would still owe thousands of dollars. The mother's language barrier would have made cutting through the administrative red tape prohibitively difficult. The father would have risked losing his job for taking off work to be in court. Their son, who had been missing class to translate for his mother, would have fallen further behind in school. I was further frustrated by the likelihood that this family would fall right back into the same debt trap again, until and unless they begin receiving monthly assistance benefits. Without ongoing cash assistance, my clients' will not be able to stay afloat. Their current rent is \$1283 and their only source of income is the father's earnings of \$1385. After paying rent, they have barely \$100 left for food and supplies for a family of four.

Over the span of three months, my intern teammate, Jonathan Samper, and I dedicated ourselves to assisting this family. We are simply legal interns, looking to help a family facing tough times. We got an up-close look at the challenges low-income New Yorkers face navigating the complicated bureaucracy. The efficiency and effectiveness of public assistance

is limited by the high volume of requests and disconnect in procedures and paperwork between and among organizations. Even though my clients had applied for assistance in the past, had taken off work to attend appointments, had their fingerprints taken, this was all inaccessible during the re-application process.

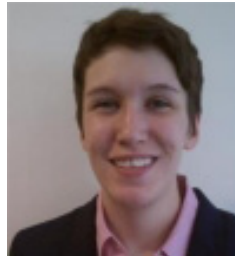
Mayor de Blasio began his term with a focus on low-income housing issues. He appointed Steve Banks to head the HRA. Banks spent 33 years with The Legal Aid Society, fighting for low-income New Yorkers as a ‘voice for the voiceless.’ At his appointment press conference, Mayor de Blasio spoke of Banks, saying: “I can guarantee you he’s going to be good at cutting red tape and he won’t accept bureaucracy that doesn’t make sense. He’s devoted his life to challenging bureaucracy when it didn’t make sense.” In testimony before NY City Council, Mr. Banks outlined an approach to welfare benefits, arguing that the city has contributed to rising homelessness by aggressively booting people from welfare rolls. The goal of Mr. Banks appointment has not trickled down to change the reality faced by the masses. Applying for welfare is an uphill battle pitting agitated employees against desperate individuals. It is my hope that this administration can work to a make it easier for the neediest members of society to benefit from valuable city services.

While Mayor deBlasio’s proposed reforms are a good start, it still takes dedicated individuals with the legal skills to navigate this complex system. Restructuring public assistance organizations can only go so far. Investing in legal services organizations, such as Brooklyn A, are often the only way that low-income families, like my clients can receive the support they need. My experiences this summer on the front lines of NYC’s housing crisis was both frustrating and rewarding.

1. The Legal Aid Society, *Banks to Leave The Legal Aid Society After 33 Years to Head HRA In New City Administration*, (March 01, 2014) <http://www.legal-aid.org/en/mediaandpublicinformation/inthenews/bankstoleavethelegalaidociety.aspx>

2. Id.

3. Erin Durkin, *\$66m homeless assist plan*, Daily News, May 20, 2014, at 2. Daily News Tuesday May 20, 2014 pg 2



Strengthening Community Based Organizations Through Legal Services

by Alyssa Baldassini

After completing my 2L year, I spent this past summer as a legal intern in Brooklyn A’s Community and Economic Development (CED) Program. Prior to law school I worked as an outreach coordinator through an AmeriCorps program; assisting not-for-profits build capacity so they could better serve local communities in the Boston area. Although the work I was doing as an outreach coordinator differed from the projects I worked on this past summer in the CED Program, the goals of both positions substantially overlapped. In both positions, my work focused on increasing organizational strength so that community based organizations can increase the effectiveness of the services they are providing. While working alongside the dedicated and hardworking attorneys of the CED Program, I learned about the full range of services the unit provides, covering legal issues ranging from real estate matters, to corporate and tax advice, to employment law.

As an intern I was able to engage

with a number of these legal areas. I helped file the Certificate of Incorporation and develop corporate governance documents (i.e. bylaws and conflict of interest policy) for an NYC based organization that seeks to provide movement and dance programs for low and moderate income individuals. I also assisted the CED Program in updating their model documents (i.e. bylaws, whistleblower policy, and conflict of interest policy) to comply with the NY Non-Profit Revitalization Act, which overhauled NY not-for-profit law and took effect July 1st. Additionally, in the hopes of condensing complex legal information, I created informational handouts for not-for-profits about how to obtain state and local tax exemptions.

Through the guidance and instruction of the enthusiastic attorneys of the CED Program this past summer, I not only learned about the minutiae of community development lawyering, but also cultivated an appreciation for our clients and the importance of the services Brooklyn A provides.



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