

Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A

BUILDING COMMUNITIES
ENSURING OPPORTUNITY
ACHIEVING JUSTICE

WINTER 2016



Keeping Families in Their Homes

By: Caroline Iosso, Fair Housing Advocate, Preserving Affordable Housing Program, Group Representation Unit

IN APRIL OF 2015, Maria and her children, as well as the two neighboring families who live in a two-family home in East New York, Brooklyn, came to Brooklyn A desperate for help after their landlord cut off the gas and electric in their homes. During their intake meeting, they questioned the legality of citizenship status-based harassment; their landlord routinely threatened to call Immigration and Customs Enforcement on them if they did not pay their rent in cash whenever he demanded. Given their precarious citizenship status, I knew how quickly the situation could deteriorate if the landlord decided to act on [Continued on page 2](#)

BIG CHANGES FOR 2016

As a member of LEAP (Legal Advocacy Partnership), a consortium of legal services providers dedicated to serving low-income tenants in New York City, Brooklyn A helped develop an Anti-Harassment Tenant Protection Legal Services Program designed to fight the increased pressure of displacement and homelessness for low-income New Yorkers. New York City's Human Resources Administration awarded funding to LEAP for this proposal, which enables Brooklyn A to expand our work in East New York to combat tenant harassment and keep individuals and families in their homes. Brooklyn A will serve as "Brooklyn Lead" for other grantees in Brooklyn under this contract, and over the next two and a half years will receive \$1.6 million per year to fund the project!

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his threats. I advised Maria and her neighbors that they could file a complaint with the New York City Office of Housing Preservation Development (HPD) based on Fair Housing Law violations. At that time, they decided not to file a claim.

A couple weeks later I received a tearful phone call from Maria, informing me of the latest act in her landlord's campaign of harassment: he cut off the water, eliminating the last of their utilities. Maria, her children, and the neighboring families were forced to leave their homes; they would spend

seek justice alone.

After speaking with Maria, I immediately began my advocacy efforts; I made phone calls and sent emails, contacting elected officials, city agencies and neighborhood organizations. I even pleaded with and got yelled at by the landlord himself on several occasions. As time passed with no resolution, my attempts grew increasingly desperate. Our next course of action was to resort to legal means and take the landlord to New York City Housing Court.

Adam Meyers, Staff Attorney

My ultimate goal is to be a resource to community members in need – people like Maria and her neighbors, who did not have regular leases or the benefit of rent-regulated apartments. . . . I knew that Brooklyn A would do everything in our power to advocate until their services were restored and they could return to their homes. What I did not realize was that it would take months for that goal to be met.

the next several months moving from one temporary home to the next.

As Brooklyn A's Fair Housing Advocate my ultimate goal is to be a resource to community members in need – people like Maria and her neighbors, who did not have regular leases or the benefit of rent-regulated apartments. Adding to their vulnerability were their mixed citizenship statuses and the fact that they were monolingual Spanish-speakers. I knew that Brooklyn A would do everything in our power to advocate until their services were restored and they could return to their homes. What I did not realize was that it would take months for that goal to be met. With the frustrating ineffectiveness and inefficiencies of housing court, as well as the apathy and sluggishness of agency bureaucracy, I can only imagine how much longer it would have taken if they were left to

in the Group Representation Unit, began preparing for the first court appearance; meanwhile, I diligently continued my advocacy work. By the time the court date arrived, water had been restored to the building. At that court appearance, the landlord claimed, in the same breath, that the tenants were not tenants and that they refused to pay their utility bills. Fortunately, Maria and her neighbors had copies of their bill payments and expired leases to show the judge; allowing the judge to order the landlord to restore services. As is often the case, the landlord did not abide by the court's decision. After a second court appearance and a no-show from

the landlord, we filed a contempt motion, urging the court to punish him with penalties for not complying with the order.

Despite our initial success of reinstating water service, it took months of calling and emailing HPD to turn the other services back on. First, the electricity came back through HPD's Emergency Relief Program. With electricity restored, Maria, her neighbors and their children moved back into the building. We fought longer for cooking gas; finally heading directly to National Grid (gas and electric utility company), with the court stipulation and explanatory letter from their lawyer in hand, to open accounts in the tenants' names. Though we received resistance and even pushback from National Grid, because the tenants did not have traditional leases, we were finally able to convince them to concede.

In the hallway of National Grid, after it was confirmed that the electrical meters would be installed and the gas restored, we hugged and cried in joyous relief. In November of 2015, seven months after taking on the case and just in time for Thanksgiving, Brooklyn A delivered on our goal to return Maria and her neighbors to their home with utility services intact.

Reflecting on this hard-won battle, it's shocking how difficult it can be to enforce the laws currently in place to protect citizens and how easy it is to take advantage of vulnerable tenants that lack advocates to negotiate and guide them

through the various decision-making channels. I feel fortunate that the tenants came to Brooklyn A, that I personally was able to forge relationships with them, and that ultimately, they returned to their homes free from landlord harassment. ■



New Staff at Brooklyn A

Help us welcome these great new additions to our staff!

Sebastian Brady

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



Sebastian graduated from the University of California San Diego in the spring of 2015 with a B.A. in Political Science. Prior to joining Brooklyn A, he completed multiple internships, most recently at the Center for American Progress where he compiled research on voter ID laws. In the fall of 2014 he interned for the Brookings Institution, writing for a National Security Law Blog. Sebastian played Volleyball at the collegiate level, but really enjoys playing tennis; he would love to find new players to team up with.

Samuel Hamilton Chiera, Esq.

Staff Attorney, Preserving Affordable
Housing Program, Group
Representation Unit



While attending Brooklyn Law School, Sam interned at Brooklyn A in 2012 and 2013. He graduated from Brooklyn Law School in 2014; shortly thereafter he began working at Brooklyn A as a Brooklyn Law School Fellow. He was hired as a Staff Attorney in January 2016.

Ana Granados

Legal Advocate, Preserving
Affordable Housing Program, Group
Representation Unit



In 2014, Ana graduated from Queens College with a B.A. in Political Science. While attending school she interned in a variety of legal capacities, as a Paralegal at the Ronald P Zinner Law Offices, an Assistant Investigator for the State of New York Executive Department – Division of Human Rights, and as a Legislative Associate for the 67th District of Assembly. After graduating from college she began working as a Case Assistant at Gordon & Rees LLP, where she performed legal aid and administrative tasks.

Sage Hughes, Esq.

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



In 2014, Sage received her J.D. from the University of Colorado Law School; she was Order of the Coif in addition to making the Dean's List. Sage began working at Simpson Thacher shortly after graduating, and has rotated through both the Capital Markets and Credit Groups; she was also very active in the firm's pro-bono small business clinic.

Gregory Louis, Esq.

Deputy Program Director, Preserving
Affordable Housing Program, Group
Representation Unit



Greg began working at Brooklyn A as a Staff Attorney in the Group Representation Unit in the spring of 2014, and was promoted to Senior Staff Attorney in 2015. Prior to joining Brooklyn A he worked at Legal Services of the Hudson Valley for over two years. He was promoted to Deputy Program Director for the Group Representation Unit in January 2016.

Mateja Lucic

Development and Communications
Coordinator, AmeriCorps*VISTA



Mateja is a recent graduate of the University of Buffalo with a B.A. in Economics and Legal Studies. He has always wanted to be involved in the community and work with a non-profit organization; given his relevant course study at UB he believed he could best serve the community by working with Brooklyn A. He enjoys traveling, trying new kinds of food, and learning about different cultures.

Adam Meyers, Esq.

Staff Attorney, Preserving Affordable Housing Program, Group Representation Unit



Adam interned for Brooklyn A's Group Representation Unit during his summers while attending

Harvard Law School. After graduating in 2013 he became a Skadden Law Fellow, allowing him to continue his work at Brooklyn A. He was hired as a Staff Attorney in the fall of 2015.

Austen Refuerzo, Esq.

Staff Attorney, Preserving Affordable Housing Program, Individual Representation Unit



Austen began working at Brooklyn A in 2013 as a University of California Berkley Law Bridge Fellow. He was

hired as a Staff Attorney in the fall of 2015.

Charnyl Revere

Staff Attorney, Preserving Affordable Housing Program, Individual Representation Unit



Charnyl graduated from Syracuse University in 2009 with a B.A. in Economics and Public Policy; she

went on to receive her J.D. from Florida A&M University in 2013. Prior to coming to Brooklyn A she volunteered part-time with the Georgia Innocence Project, where she assisted with inmate exoneration by performing intake evaluations to screen for eligibility. At the same time she also performed audits for

Atlanta Seafood and Catering Company. Before moving to New York City she spent her spare time coaching gymnastics, providing instruction to people of all ages and skill levels. Charnyl started at Brooklyn A as an AmeriCorps*VISTA Legal Services Coordinator in the summer of 2015, and was hired as a Staff Attorney in January 2016.

Myrna Sanabria

Paralegal, Preserving Affordable Housing Program, Individual Representation Unit



Myrna received her Paralegal Certificate from Brooklyn College. She has 36 years of experience in the legal services

profession, including working for the individual landlord-tenant unit of the former East Brooklyn Office. Prior to coming back to work with Brooklyn A she worked for Bedford-Stuyvesant Community Legal Services. Myrna enjoys cooking in her spare time, especially for her large family.

Christopher Sina, Esq.

Staff Attorney, Preserving Affordable Housing Program, Individual Representation Unit



Chris began working to at Brooklyn A as a summer law intern in the individual housing unit, then as an New York University Public

Interest Law Fellow. He was hired as a Staff Attorney in the fall of 2015.

Serena Stewart

Development and Communications Coordinator, AmeriCorps*VISTA



Serena graduated from St. John Fisher College in 2010 with a BA in Political Science, and began working for the

public library shortly thereafter. In the fall of 2013 she began serving as a Teen Services Assistant for the Maplewood Community Library; she planned and implemented ongoing programs and events, helping to create positive, safe spaces for teens after school and during the summer. In the spring of 2015, she interned with the Development team of Easter Seals New York, she performed research to identify potential funding sources and completed grant applications. In her spare time she enjoys writing spoken word pieces on social justice issues; she likes sharing her work at community events.

Sara Wolkenstorfer, Esq.

Staff Attorney, Poverty Justice Solutions Fellow, Preserving Affordable Housing Program, Group Representation Unit



Sara recently joined Brooklyn A as a Poverty Justice Solutions Fellow, a program created by Chief Judge Jonathan

Lippman of the New York Court of Appeals to provide low-income and in-need New Yorkers with representation in their fight against eviction and homelessness. Sara graduated from Syracuse University of Law in the spring of 2015 with her J.D. She has a history of community based legal work and pro bono public legal service involvement; she worked with the Public Defender Service of the District of Columbia and the Syracuse University Criminal Defense Clinic. In her spare time she enjoys Japanese comic books and animation. ■



(L to R) Matthew Olsen - New York University School of Law, Brianna Cummings - Columbia Law School, Alice Wade - Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, Taylor Keating - Cornell Law School, Jed Russell - Brooklyn Law School, Tiffany Pan - Columbia Law School, Jessica Lim - Georgetown University Law Center, Alodie Efamba - Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law

Summer Interns

By: Alice Wade, Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, Preserving Affordable Housing Program, Group Representation Unit

AS A SUMMER LEGAL INTERN with the Group Representation Unit, it was hard not to love Brooklyn A. I gained valuable legal experience that will serve as a firm foundation for my legal career. I worked with an amazing staff of attorneys in a supportive and collegial environment. Most importantly, I helped provide an essential service to communities struggling to maintain their identity, and for people fighting to save their homes.

This past fall, I continued my internship with Brooklyn A through Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law's Public Interest Externship program. Through this program, I continued the work I started over the summer, deepening my understanding of the law through research and writing, and working directly with attorneys and clients. Further, I learned what it truly means to be an advocate. Though we are told in school that as prospective lawyers, we must represent our clients, to understand their interests and fight for them, I did not fully understand what it meant to fight for a client until I saw Brooklyn A's attorneys in action. The dedication in this organization is inspiring to say the least and under the supervision of such dedicated attorneys I will develop the skills necessary to be an effective advocate for those who most need legal representation. ■

Thank you to all of our summer 2015 interns!

- BRIANNA CUMMINGS
- ALODIE EFAMBA
- TAYLOR KEATING
- JESSICA LIM
- MATTHEW OLSEN
- TIFFANY PAN
- JED RUSSELL
- ALICE WADE

Do you have a passion for public interest law?

Brooklyn A is currently accepting applications for summer 2016 interns. To learn more, visit us at www.bka.org/get-involved

The Skadden Foundation Fellowship

By: Serena Stewart, Development and Communications Coordinator, Americorps*VISTA

EVERY YEAR THE SKADDEN Foundation accepts applications for their prestigious and highly competitive Fellowship. They invite law school graduates and outgoing judicial law clerks that wish to pursue a career in public interest to apply for the opportunity to work for two-years at the organization of their choice. Prior to applying, prospective fellows select the organization they wish to work for,

The Fellowship was established in 1988, to provide increased support for recent law school graduates wishing to pursue a career in civil legal services, and represent some of the most vulnerable populations, including: low-income, seniors, homeless and disabled, in addition to those dispossessed of their civil or human rights. The Skadden Foundation envisions their fellows going on to have a strong impact on the legal field; almost 90% of fellows continue on in public interest or public sector work.

and develop their anticipated project with two or more staff attorneys at the organization.

The Skadden Foundation receives many applications, but accepts approximately 100 semifinalists, which are then narrowed down to 56 finalists. This year they accepted 28 fellows that will serve at public interest organizations, in various areas of concentration, throughout the United States, in cities where Skadden offices are located.

This coming fall, Brooklyn A will once again have the pleasure of host-

ing another fellow, Anna Deknatel. Anna graduated from University of Pennsylvania Law School in 2014 Magna Cum Laude and Order of the Coif, and in 2006 from Harvard University. During her time as a law clerk for Judge Stong of the Eastern District of New York Bankruptcy Court, she drafted written and oral decisions, bench memos, and orders for the docket of Chapter 7, 13, and 11 cases.

Prior to that, she interned for several different legal organizations, including Penn Law Civil Practice Clinic, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the National Consumer Law Center and the Legal Aid Society. She worked on a variety of civil legal matters, including consumer protection, public housing, tenants' rights, public benefits and debt collection.

Anna will join the Consumer and Economic Advocacy Program at Brooklyn A. Over the next two years, her work will focus on bankruptcy representation for homeowners fac-

ing foreclosure, through affordable mortgage modifications and restructuring of debt. Rather than viewing bankruptcy as a detriment, she recognizes the ways in which it may be used to provide relief for homeowners from their current debt burdens and obtain greater financial stability over the long-term.

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Brooklyn A has a long history of hosting Skadden Fellows, and this past October, Brooklyn A welcomed Adam Meyers, former Skadden Fellow, as a new Staff Attorney in the Preserving Affordable Housing Program, Group Representation Unit. Previously we hosted Daniel Hafetz, Fordham University School of Law, and now Senior Advisor to General Counsel at the New York City Housing Authority. During his two year fellowship, Daniel worked in our Community and Economic Development Program.

Brooklyn A looks forward to hosting another Skadden Fellow, and anticipates the exceptional work and wealth of experience Anna will bring to our clients! ■



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