Education & Legal Giants In Cypress Hills, Brooklyn

By Nigel Codrington

When a large business corporation decides to establish its presence in a new location, it does so mainly because it identifies a need for its products and services in the surrounding areas. It then assembles the best surveyors, architects, project managers, bankers and lawyers to make the project a reality. This is exactly what is happening in Cypress Hills, Brooklyn, where a community organization, educators, parents, children and lawyers are creating a permanent home for an innovative new elementary school.

What makes this project amazing is that the participants do not have the resources of a large business corporation, or access to a prestigious law firm. What they do possess is a burning desire to improve their community through creativity and hard work. They also do have access to a unique group of legal services lawyers who put their clients before personal gain. Together, they are engaged in a project that is usually taken on only by large business corporations. This makes them giants in their own right, and here is their story.

Cypress Hills is a community that forms part of East New York in Brooklyn. It is bounded by Atlantic Avenue to the south and Van Sinderen Avenue to the west. The residents are mainly low income, minority, immigrant families, who are in pursuit of the “American Dream".

Although community groups such as the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC) have made great strides in improving the socioeconomic conditions in the neighborhood, many problems still remain.

One of the main problems is overcrowded schools. The situation was so terrible that on one occasion, a local school was forced to have two different classes with their respective teachers in the same room. Some schools have had to conduct classes in their building's annexes or in portable classrooms that are located in their parking lots or yards. This only served to alienate the students from the rest of the school population.

Other schools tried to solve their overcrowding problem by sending two classes to one school from

1st to 3rd grade, to another school for the 4th grade and then to another school for the 5th grade. The resulting lack of educational continuity had a negative impact on the intellectual and social development of the students.

The Cypress Hills Advocates for Education (CHAEP) estimates that the neighborhood needs over 2000 seats before the problem of overcrowding can be eliminated. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that when the Cypress Hills Community School/P.S. 89 (“Community School”) was founded in 1997, there were no “seats” available. The new school was housed in the facilities of another school, I.S. 302.

The Community School is unique in terms of its administration. The school is a New Visions School
IN MEMORIAM

Since publication of our last newsletter, Brooklyn A has lost two dear friends. Although they were very, very different from each other, Judge Harold R. Tyler and Luis Peña represent a lot of what Brooklyn A is all about and where we get our strength and direction from.

Judge Harold R. Tyler was a senior partner at Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler, one of the most prestigious “Wall Street” law firms. He served as Chief of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Justice Department in the Eisenhower Administration, as one of Governor Rockefeller’s chief advisors, as a Federal Judge and as Deputy U.S. Attorney General in the Ford Administration. He was in charge of the Commission that investigated the infamous killing of four American churchwomen in El Salvador in 1980, and in various capacities played a major role in 20th century American legal history. Among his protégés are Time Warner’s Richard Parsons, and former Mayor Rudy Giuliani. But of most direct significance to us, as a Republican, he led the national battle to save legal services against the first onslaught in the 1970s, and he (and we) won. His daughter served with distinction for about eight years as a social worker at a dynamic senior citizens program in Bushwick, and that led to his long-term relationship with Brooklyn A. Starting in 1987, on the steps of the City Bar Association building in midtown Manhattan, when I introduced myself to him and asked for his participation in our 20th Anniversary celebration, Judge Tyler said an enthusiastic yes to that and to our every subsequent request for support, help, advice, celebration and consolation, up until our breakfast meeting with him shortly before his unexpected passing. He was a giant that lent his massive influence, as well as his mind, heart and soul to Brooklyn A’s efforts to empower and bring justice to the low-income neighborhoods of North and East Brooklyn. We’re so proud and happy that he was able to see and take pride in the dedication of our Willumsburg headquarters building to him and to his dear friend and colleague Bob MacCrate, and to another giant, Sargent Shriver.

Luis Peña also left us recently. Luis was a humble friend and neighbor, who helped found a small local housing organization, Los Sures, that has become the core of the salvation and restoration of the Southside, Williamsburg neighborhood. Luis was one of the leadership group, with Billy Ramos, Ricardo and Iris Molina, and others, that helped create and sustain, to the present day, the first low-income tenant cooperative in Williamsburg-Bushwick. That building, 149 South 4th Street, has stood and stands as a model of and the centerpiece to the stabilization and revitalization of the whole area surrounding it. His South 4th Street Block Association, which was founded over twenty years ago, brings joy and strength and solidarity to the area, celebrating victories and happy occasions, bringing consolation to sad times, and making the community united and whole.

In some ways so different, and in other ways so much the same, Judge Tyler and Luis Peña—we salute you both as pillars of the fight for the good and just, and for what Brooklyn A is so proud to be a part of. You’ll always remain in our hearts and minds, as inspirations and models, that we pledge to honor by our continuing efforts to bring justice and self-determination to our clients and their communities.

—Marty Needelman
Brooklyn A’s Project Director & Chief Counsel

Brooklyn A would like to thank the following law school interns and externs for joining us this summer and helping us serve our communities’ legal needs.

Interns

Chris Beatty, New York Law School
Jed Bellman, University of Michigan Law School
Genevieve Blake, Fordham Law School
Nigel Cordington, Fordham Law School
Tarique Collins, University of Pennsylvania Law School
Cheryl Courtney, Brooklyn Law School
Douglas Cuthbertson, Fordham Law School
Ian Dewsbury, Columbia Law School
Kevin Frankel, Columbia Law School
Sarah Kelly, New York Law School
Christopher Lovejoy, Fordham Law School
Tareneh Marciano, Fordham Law School
Michael Rubin, Fordham Law School
Andrew Shapiro, Fordham Law School
Farrah Trinker, Fordham Law School
Paul Vernon, New York University Law School

Externs

Adam Adler, Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson
Elizabeth Bellis, Debevoise and Plimpton
Diana Elkind, Weil, Gotshal & Manges
Elora Mulkherjee, Debevoise and Plimpton
Irfan Mughal, Debevoise and Plimpton
Marine Mansell, Debevoise and Plimpton
Scott Selig, Debevoise and Plimpton
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Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP, and 2004 Brooklyn A Honoree

Michael Flanagan, Vice President of Community Relations at Citibank, N.A.

Nelson Perez, Manager of Community Relations at Con Edison

Mariadelle Priest, Vice President of Housing and Community Development at North Fork Bank

Patricia Ricketts, Vice President of the Community Partnerships Office, East Region, at JP Morgan Chase

Stephanie Wall, Director of Community Reinvestment Activities at US Trust Company of New York

Brooklyn A welcomes the following new members to its Board of Directors:

Moronke Oshin-Martin is the Communications Director for Teamsters Local 237. Ms. Oshin-Martin holds a master's degree in journalism from New York University and is a member of the New York Press Club, The Deadline Club, The New York Association of Black Journalists, and the National Association for Female Executives.

Ramon Peguero is Legislative Counsel for the New York City Comptroller. At the Comptroller's Office, he works with staff members of city, state, and federal elected officials to analyze and create legislation that assist the Comptroller to enhance his ability to invest and better manage the funds of New York City. He has worked for various community organizations prior to his current work, and currently is also a board member of the Nuestros Niños Child Care Center and the Community and Parents Day Care Center.

Peter Cross is Managing Partner of Jacob, Medinger & Finnegan LLP where he specializes in litigation and entertainment law. He and his firm are active in Brooklyn A's "pro-bono" program where they represent victims of predatory real estate and lending practices.

Members of Brooklyn A's Board and Advisory Committee Tour Community Development Sites

Members of Brooklyn A's Board of Directors and Advisory Committee participated in an all-morning tour of North and East Brooklyn on Friday, April 1st. The tour highlighted three unique project sites developed by community-based organizations (Southside United Housing Development Fund Corp., Brownsville Multi-Service Family Health Center, Cypress Hills Child Care Center) in partnership with Brooklyn A and its Community Economic Development Unit.

Visitors pose in the Cypress Hills Child Care Center playground. From left to right: Jessica Rose, Attorney, Brooklyn A; Nick Moore, VP, Citibank; Ken Mahon, Executive VP & CFO, Dime Savings Bank of Williamsburgh; Mike Flanagan, VP, Citibank; Marty Needelman, Project Director, Brooklyn A; Tom Early, Executive Director, Health Plus; Patricia Strong, Community Development Officer, Dime Savings Bank of Williamsburgh; Paul Acinapura, General Counsel, Brooklyn A; Denis Berger, Consultant, Brooklyn A; Maria Collier, Director, Cypress Hills Child Care Corp.; Moronke Oshin-Martin, Board member, Brooklyn A; Joe Lipofsky, Board member, Brooklyn A; April Dubison, Community Affairs Director, Keyspan; Patricia Ricketts, VP, JP Morgan Chase.
JOHN M. CALLAGY
Kelley Drye & Warren LLP

John Callagy is Chairman of the law firm of Kelley Drye & Warren LLP and a litigator representing American and European clients in a panoply of subjects: securities law, contracts, insurance coverage, intellectual property, environmental law, and labor law. His clients have included JP Morgan Chase, Prince Jefri of Brunei, SmithKline Beecham, Xerox and other corporate giants. Mr. Callagy has also brought his financial and corporate acumen to bear on behalf of Brooklyn A. He chaired our first-ever, successful, and unprecedented in legal services, Capital Campaign, and was instrumental in bringing major supporters into the fold and leading the effort to raise almost $4 million in cash and in-kind contributions. As a result of John’s leadership, Brooklyn A purchased its 4-story headquarters building in Williamsburg and opened a neighborhood office in Bushwick. His time with the campaign allowed him to enjoy getting to know the staff and facilities of Brooklyn A and visiting projects owned or developed by our community partner groups in community economic development.

Paul J. Acinapura, Brooklyn A’s General Counsel, says “John was an exceptional leader of a distinguished group of lawyers and corporate executives as the Chair of Brooklyn A’s successful Capital Campaign from 1997-2001. As Chairman of Kelley Drye & Warren LLP, John has been in the forefront for a decade in supporting the firm’s work in partnering with Brooklyn A and providing pro bono legal services to our clients and communities.”

Mr. Callagy has been generous with his time in other civic activities as well: as a member of the Board of Regents of Georgetown University (his alma mater); as a trustee of the St. Joseph’s Hospital Foundation in Stamford, Connecticut; a member of the Urban League of Southwestern Connecticut; and pro bono litigator for a Catholic girls’ school threatened by encroachment by the nearby Westchester airport. For seven years, he has also met the challenges of serving on the Board of Finances of Darien, Connecticut, where the tradition of direct democracy [think very long town meetings] is alive and well. Mr. Callagy and his wife Molly, an interior designer, have four children: Morgan, 34; Megan, 32; Catherine, 30 and Claire, 17. In his spare time, John has completed two triathlons.

THOMAS EARLY
Health Plus

Tom Early has been an active member of Brooklyn A’s Advisory Committee for five years. Recruited by former chair John Imperiale, Tom has supported Brooklyn A in fund-raising efforts, in offering the pro bono services of a financial executive and in many other ways. “Tom has been a consistent and great friend of Brooklyn A and an active and critically important member of our Advisory Committee,” says Marty Needelman, Project Director and Chief Counsel of Brooklyn A.

As Executive Director of Health Plus, Tom is a leader in health care finance. Health Plus is a non-profit HMO that has pioneered free and low-cost health insurance to children and adults. Under Tom’s direction, Health Plus has grown to provide a quarter of a million New Yorkers with access to medical care. Health Plus is headquartered in Brooklyn and employs many Brooklynites. Tom himself was educated in Brooklyn at St. Francis College and lived in Brooklyn with his wife Mary Anne until his growing family bustled out of their home. Tom and Mary Anne now live in Nassau County with their children: Kelly, 20; Katie, 18; Thomas, 15; Deirdre, 14; and Mary, 11.

Tom has been involved in health care finance for 25 years, starting at Presbyterian Hospital, followed by a decade at St. Barnabas Hospital as Assistant Director of Finance, before serving as the Director of Finance at Lutheran Medical Center, and eventually assuming the leadership of Health Plus. In addition...
to an undergraduate degree in accounting, Tom completed the training and certification to become a C.P.A.

Tom has been generous with his time and energy to many community groups in addition to Brooklyn A, which includes serving on the Boards of the Caribbean American Chamber of Commerce, the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, the American Lung Association, and the Angel Guardian Foundation. He finds time to shoot hoops in a church basement in Bay Ridge with other weekend warriors, and to coach his brood in the fundamentals of the game. Asked what he finds special about Brooklyn A, Tom says, “the dedication of the people there to improving life in the borough.” One could also say the same of the energetic and giving Tom Early.

**DR. CLAUDE OFFORD**

Brownsville Multi-Service Family Health Center

Dr. Claude Offord is a distinguished leader in community health, and a physician dedicated to the service of Brooklyn’s youth. After two decades of service at Brownsville Multi-Service Family Health Center (BMS), he is beginning to treat the next generation, the children of his original patients. Dr. Offord joined BMS in 1984, and has the longest career of the professional staff there. He has worn many different hats: Lead Physician in Pediatrics, School Physician, and Medical Director. His professional area of specialization is Adolescent Medicine. He gets a lot of practical experience at home in Bed-Stuy with his own children – Ajanu, 15; Chelita, 15; Yejide, 12; Adetoro, 10; and Elodie, 8.

Claude was born and raised in Compton, California. In high school, he was an honor student and varsity athlete playing football and basketball. His outstanding high school record earned him a place at Cornell, where he graduated in the mid ’70s with a degree in science education. He received his medical education from Rutgers Medical School and completed his residency in pediatrics at the Children’s Hospital of Newark under the auspices of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

He has made several trips to Africa as a “shadow” physician, observing local doctors in their family practice. In Senegal and other countries, he was struck by how African doctors approach individual patients with a wide-ranging inquiry, including questions about family dynamics and the home environment. Upon his return to Brooklyn, he worked to implement this cross-cultural perspective and encouraged his colleagues to do likewise.

In addition to his clinical responsibilities, Dr. Offord oversees many BMS administrative and managerial projects. He works closely with Brooklyn A’s General Counsel, Paul Acinapura, who has for many years guided BMS through sticky wickets in funding, tax, and economic development issues. Together, they have seen Brownsville struggle from a community on its knees to an area of vibrant growth and change.

Claude loves the zesty stew that is Brooklyn; he sees a patient population that includes African-Americans and Afro-Caribbean, South Americans and Central Americans, Russian, and Chinese families. In his free time, he pursues an eclectic taste in music (jazz, R & B, folk, Chinese, Celtic), sketches for pleasure, and reads widely on nutrition, health, psychology, and physics. His overriding quest, in the clinic, in his travels, at home, and in art, is “Creating the We that connects us” into a whole greater than the sum of its parts.
CYPRESS HILLS  
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developed as part of a public-private collaborative venture between New Visions for Public Schools, Cypress Hills community-activist parents, and the CHLDC. The school is governed by two co-directors, Irene Leon, a Board of Education appointee, and Maria Jaya-Vega, a parent-community leader, who also assisted in the founding of the school. Teachers are selected by a committee that consists of both parents and incumbent teachers. Parents and members of the CHLDC also sit on the Community School’s governance committee. No other school in the country can boast of an administrative structure in which parents and community leaders play such an active role.

The uniqueness of the Community School does not end there. The Community School consists of students from K-8. Each student is expected to demonstrate proficiency in both Spanish and English by the end of the 5th grade. This is accomplished by a dual language curriculum in which English-dominant and Spanish-dominant children jointly attend classes in English and Spanish. The Community School also provides training opportunities for interested teachers since its teaching model is unique. For the past two consecutive years, the school has secured a 100% graduation rate for its 8th graders. According to the New York State Assessments, 65% of Grade 4 students at the Community School met or exceeded the grade level standards in English Language Arts (ELA) for the 2004-2005 academic year. The state average for Grade 4 ELA was 70%. Among the Grade 8 students of the Community School, 55% met or exceeded the grade level standard in ELA. That exceeds the state average for 8th graders which was only 48% in 2005.

There is one way in which the Community School is not unique. Like other public schools in Cypress Hills, its students are affected by overcrowding because they share a building with another school. This limits the amount of room available for programs and activities, which in turn stunts the students’ development. Community School administrators envision a school population of 400, but have been unable to meet this goal because of limited classroom space.

Michelle Neugebauer, CHLDC’s Executive Director, together with community-activist parents, identified that there was a need for finding a permanent home for the Community School. CHLDC and the parents had a successful history of working together to establish the school. In addition, the leaders of CHLDC had decades of experience in promoting business and housing development in Cypress Hills. It was during that time that CHLDC developed a relationship with the Community & Economic Development Unit (CED) of Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A (Brooklyn A).

The Brooklyn A CED Unit is no match for a Wall Street law firm in terms of its size. It is led by Project Director Paul

“We call on Brooklyn A for advice on every legal issue, from incorporations to taxation.”

—Michelle Neugebauer  
CHLDC Executive Director

Acinapura, and Staff Attorneys Ralph Martinez, Jessica Rose, and Hillary Exter. However, in terms of quality of work, commitment to clients and the array of community and economic legal services provided, Brooklyn A is a national leader. According to Ms. Neugebauer, CHLDC’s relationship with Brooklyn A dates back to the late 1980s. “We call on Brooklyn A for advice on every legal issue, from incorporations to taxation”, says Ms. Neugebauer.

In the tradition of corporate players, CHLDC, community-activist parents, and Brooklyn A embarked on meeting the identified need of their “clients”, the children of Cypress Hills. The first step was to secure financing for the project.

CHLDC obtained a discretionary grant of $20 million from the City Council which was part of a $150 million city-wide City Council Speaker Initiative. Part of the proceeds of the grant were used to purchase a 52,000-square-foot former factory located at 2911 Atlantic Avenue. The CED Unit served as counsel to CHLDC throughout the transaction, from drafting and negotiating the contract of sale, to ensuring that CHLDC secured good title to the property. The legal team also set up the Cypress Hills Community School Development Corporation (“CHCSDC”) as a subsidiary of CHLDC for the purposes of acquiring the property and developing the project. The legal team did not abandon its clients at this critical point in the project. They reviewed, negotiated and drafted the agreements between CHCSDC and a number of experts. These experts included management consultants, design consultants, construction managers and environmental engineers. The CED Unit has also assisted and assisted CHLDC and CHCSDC with issues involving City, State and Federal laws and regulations.

The final hurdle that now faces CHCSDC and the CEDU is negotiating and drafting a lease agreement with the School Construction Authority (“SCA”) and the New York City Department of Education (“NYCDOE”). The plan is to lease the new school at 2911 Atlantic Avenue to the NYCDOE and use the rent to finance the construction and maintenance of the property. This lease model is a unique and groundbreaking approach to public/private (community-based/ not-for-profit) collaboration in the construction of school facilities. The only predecessor for this model in New York City is the Thurgood Marshall Academy, funded by the Abyssinian Development Corporation. If all goes well, the Community School should be opened for business by the fall semester of 2007.

There is an old Chinese proverb that states: “A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step”. For the residents of Cypress Hills, that journey began in 1998 with securing funding for the acquisition of a much-needed school building. It has been seven years since that first step was made. They have endured the rigors and challenges of securing the services of experts, meeting the requirements of regulatory bodies, structuring taxation and financing mechanisms, and now they are about to establish themselves as landlords to one of the largest state agencies in the country. These activities are usually associated only with large business corporations. However, the CHLDC, CHCS and community-activist parents, with the assistance of the attorneys at the Brooklyn A CED Unit, have taught us an important lesson. They have demonstrated that patience, determination and a deep concern for the welfare of others can lead to great accomplishments. Surely, they are education and legal giants in their own right.

Nigel Codrington is a 3rd Year Fordham Law Student interning with the Community and Economic Development Unit of Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A.
Two Extraordinary Law Fellows Will Join Brooklyn A in the Struggle for Economic and Social Justice

By Erik Paulino

Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A (Brooklyn A) is very excited about welcoming two highly esteemed legal services fellows this coming fall to work on two very important issues that directly affect the future economic development of Brooklyn.

Michael Haber, a third-year student at Fordham Law School, will be joining Brooklyn A as an Equal Justice Works (formerly the National Association of Public Interest Law) Fellow. The two-year fellowship was established in 1992 to offer interested graduating law students, as well as law school graduates, the opportunity to exercise leadership in a project that involves innovative, effective legal advocacy on behalf of individuals, groups or issues that are traditionally underserved by the legal system.

Mike's project will focus on preventing hundreds of units of affordable housing throughout North and East Brooklyn from being converted into market-rate rental units and resulting in the displacement and potential homelessness of many low-income, hard-working families.

At this time, the growing gentrification of neighborhoods such as Williamsburg and Greenpoint, and the anticipated influx of higher-income residents into Bushwick, Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and East New York, is increasing housing market values. These market forces lead to pressure to sell buildings, or otherwise “buy out” commitments made to affordable housing, with the potential conversion of affordable units into market-rate rental units. The repercussions would be devastating, leading to the major displacement of families, an increase in homelessness, and the removal of families and individuals who have contributed to the rejuvenation of their communities over the past 15 years.

"I applied for an Equal Justice Works fellowship with Brooklyn A because I believe that, more than many other legal services agencies, Brooklyn A is a part of the community it serves. Brooklyn A does great things for the low-income residents of North and East Brooklyn every day and truly deserves its national reputation," explained Mike when asked why he wanted to return to work for Brooklyn A since interning with the Community and Economic Development Unit during the summer of 2003.

Mike has a master's degree from Carnegie-Mellon University and a bachelor's degree from the New College of Florida.

Max Weinstein, Brooklyn A's first-ever Skadden Fellow, will be taking the lead on combating predatory lending in North and East Brooklyn. These areas have historically been "red-lined", and have often seen local residents become the victims of housing discrimination. Currently, the neighborhoods experience foreclosure rates 400-500% above normal and growing due to the beleaguered predatory mortgages and the inability of homeowners to obtain legal counsel.

Max, who has graduated from Yale Law School this year, will spend the term of his fellowship pursuing affirmative foreclosure defense strategies and defending low-income homeowners who are maliciously wronged.

The Skadden Fellowship was established in 1988 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom, in recognition of the dire need for greater funding for graduating law students who wish to devote their professional lives to providing legal services to those in need.

Skadden Fellows have been placed with various legal assistance organizations throughout New York City through the years, but this will be the first time that a Skadden Fellow is placed within the Legal Services for New York (LSNY) network.

Max, a native New Yorker, got his first taste of Brooklyn A and its legal services work as a summer intern in 2004 when he worked closely with the Housing Unit in advocating on behalf of tenants in eviction cases. He received his bachelor's degree from Williams College, and also has a master of philosophy degree from Cambridge University.

The addition of these two fellows to our legal staff will allow Brooklyn A to expand its efforts to advocate for the less fortunate residents of Brooklyn. Governmental funding cuts, and subsequent staff cuts, have had an adverse impact in our capacity to meet the range of growing legal needs within the communities we serve. Fellowships, such as the Skadden and Equal Justice Works Fellowships, bring highly talented, civic-minded, well-trained, recent law graduates to organizations, such as Brooklyn A, that can make significant, noticeable change.
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