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SPRING 2010



Brooklyn A and the Broadway Triangle: **Fighting for What's Right**

By Shekar Krishnan



THE BROADWAY TRIANGLE case marks the beginning of my education after law school. I graduated in May 2009 from the University of Michigan Law School where in some of my most memorable classes, we studied the momentous *Brown v. Board of Education* litigation and other civil rights cases. We spent much time discussing how the Supreme Court's decisions took years to enforce on the ground. I also examined in detail the federal Fair Housing Act,

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Cypress Hills Goes Verde and Skadden Fellow to Join Brooklyn A



Brooklyn A would like to extend our deep appreciation to the law firms who have provided pro bono legal services, externs, and deferred associates this past year:

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Brooklyn A and the Broadway Triangle: Fighting for what's Right

the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Equal Protection Clause of the United States Constitution. Never did I imagine that my first case out of law school, the Broadway Triangle litigation, would involve challenging a major rezoning by New York City under these same laws and cases. I could not have grasped as a law student how the discrimination I learned about in school was playing out so forcefully on the ground in Williamsburg.



I was hired as a first year associate at Weil Gotshal & Manges beginning in the fall 2009, however, law firms have been significantly affected by the economy's rollercoaster over the past two years and incoming associates were presented with

the opportunity to defer their employment offers for some time. I had come away from law school convinced that community-based legal advocacy was one of the most effective ways of making a difference and it was something I wanted to make an important part of my entire career no matter the direction it took. This deferral presented me with both the time and the opportunity to begin a meaningful and ongoing relationship with an organization providing community-based legal services and advocating tirelessly on behalf of the indigent. My search proved to be quick and easy: Brooklyn A was exactly the organization I was looking for and I decided to spend more than a year there.

In the Broadway Triangle case, we at Brooklyn A represent the Broadway Triangle Community Coalition (www.broadwaytriangle.com), and over forty community organizations in Williamsburg and Bedford Stuyvesant. Since September 2009, Marty Needelman and I worked to craft our legal challenge to this residential rezoning on the border of both communities. Our lawsuit demonstrates that the plan for housing conceived through this rezoning has a serious and intentional discriminatory impact upon minorities and a large segment of Williams-

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burg's Hasidic Jewish residents. The rezoning itself was crafted through a closed-door process that shut out most of the extraordinarily diverse Williamsburg and Bedford Stuyvesant communities. This pervasive racial and religious discrimination violates a number of civil rights laws, including every single one I had studied in great depth in law school.

In December 2009, Justice Emily Goodman of Manhattan Supreme Court granted our request to at least temporarily stay any implementation of this rezoning. We are currently awaiting the decision on our motion for a preliminary injunction, which was argued in front of Justice Goodman in March. The injunction would stop the rezoning for the entire duration of the Broadway Triangle case. The shared sense of vindication in knowing that, finally, an institution of authority and justice is scrutinizing the serious issues we have raised about this rezoning, cannot be understated. Regardless of the eventual decisions in the case, I can feel satisfied that our struggle made its way through the open doors of a courtroom, which at times felt only like a distant hope for all who had been shut out of the re-

zoning process since its very inception.

When I stood up in court in March to argue for the preliminary injunction, my first argument in court ever, all of these thoughts were on my mind and they gave me a sense of confidence. Perhaps that confidence was a direct result of knowing that Brooklyn A, the Coalition, and our numerous diverse allies were fighting for what was so right and just, and that could never be taken away from us. Or perhaps it resulted from the unyielding strength of the communities we represented and who were always behind us, quite literally so in the courtroom, where not a single seat was available. I have a sense it was a result of both.

Either way, as we now patiently wait for a decision on the injunction, I cannot help but reflect upon where I am today compared with a year ago. When I was a student, I did not even imagine that I would be part of such an inspired struggle right out of school. Today, one year later, I know I could not have found a better legal services organization to be a part of, better communities to fight for, nor better issues to deal with. ■



Cypress Hills Goes Verde

and Skadden Fellow to Join Brooklyn A

By Dan Hafetz



CYPRESS HILLS LOCAL DEVELOPMENT Corporation (CHLDC), a client of Brooklyn A for over twenty-five years, is launching a brand new green initiative. Called “Cypress Verde” (Green Cypress in Spanish), CHLDC is planning a comprehensive redevelopment of the Cypress Hills neighborhood, focusing on green jobs, buildings and combating pollution. Thanks to the Skadden Fellowship Foundation, I will be joining Brooklyn A’s Community Economic Development (CED) Unit starting in the fall of 2010.

As part of my two-year Skadden Fellowship I will represent CHLDC on Cypress Verde as a staff attorney.

My work with Cypress Verde will primarily focus on three key areas: energy efficiency retrofits to over two hundred units of housing by 2011; redevelopment of brownfields — heavily contaminated lots — into green housing or commercial space; and the creation of a green collar jobs worker training center. Together, the components



of the project will create the foundation for sustained progress in this area. Not only will CHLDC create the demand for more green labor — and thus jobs for the local community it will be working with other organizations to help train local workers to fill those jobs.

adjacent to Cypress Hills, as a New York City Teaching Fellow. I see community economic development as a way to help the families

I worked with as a teacher, but through different means. Although I left teaching to enter law school, I always knew that I would return to East New York to do community development work.

Brooklyn A has been developing its green practice for a number of years. It already has one attorney (Nikki Prenoveau, an Equal Justice Works Fellow) who has been expanding the green building practice by assisting the CED Unit’s clients who wish to incorporate green initiatives in their affordable housing and other development projects. Through the Green Building Law and Justice Project, Nikki and other members of the CED Unit are providing holistic, transactional legal representation to community-based organizations through-

out various stages of green development projects; and are developing resources on green laws and subsidy programs as well as model documents for green transactions to share with other CED lawyers and their clients.

I learned about the CED practice and the close, in-house relationship they form with their clients when I interned for Brooklyn A in the summer of 2008. I immediately become enamored of it. With its local community office model, Brooklyn A is plugged into the community in a way that is utterly unique in legal services in New York. I find that having a dedicated relationship to representing non-profits and its physical proximity to the community is what keeps Brooklyn A so closely aligned with the mission of its clients.

As CHLDC begins to integrate environmentally sustainable design, development and practice into their operations and expansion efforts, Brooklyn A, through its soon expanding Green Building Law and Justice Project, will be at their side. I can’t wait to start. ■



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