Announcing Brooklyn A’s Fair Housing Blog

By: Caroline Iosso, Fair Housing Advocate

We are excited to announce the launch of Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A’s Fair Housing Blog. There, you will find information about fair housing rights, reflections by our staff and clients about housing discrimination, links to relevant articles, invitations to events and forums, and more. It is our intention that this blog serve to elucidate some of the ins and outs of fair housing laws for advocates, community members, and policy-makers. We hope to share our work in Brooklyn and provide examples and anecdotes of what housing discrimination looks like in 2016 and the steps we take to combat it.

Throughout Brooklyn, low-income and minority residents are being pushed out of their homes and replaced by affluent New Yorkers who can pay two to ten times what they were paying for rent. This can destroy the community fabric of neighborhoods and often results from months or years of harassment, illegal construction, coerced buyout agreements, frivolous court proceedings, and intimidation. In working in neighborhoods like Williamsburg, Bushwick, Greenpoint, and East New York for decades and defending tenants who face these pressures, Brooklyn A noticed that landlords were disproportionately and intentionally targeting vulnerable and minority residents. The harassment and intimidation wasn’t affecting white, non-disabled, non-immigrant residents. Thus, Brooklyn A advocates sought to use anti-housing discrimination laws to address the effective disenfranchisement of Brooklynites of color that we were witnessing.

Fair housing laws can combat displacement and the outrageous harassment that comes with it. We don’t want to only take landlords to housing court for not repairing the ceiling that fell on one of our client’s children while he was in bed; we want to take this landlord to federal court because he fixed the leak in the apartment of that client’s neighbor—a new, white tenant. We want to call out this failure to repair a tenant’s apartment not just as a moment of incompetence by a bad landlord; this is a piece of a larger, insidious, and discriminatory strategy aimed at pushing out minority residents. At Brooklyn A, we demand that this stop. Over the course of the last two years, we have folded anti-discrimination advocacy into our affirmative litigation to keep tenants in livable and affordable housing. This blog provides us with an opportunity to share our stories and strategies with you.
Get to Know Our Newest Staff Members

We asked our newest staff members what motivated them to work for Brooklyn A and what they find most rewarding about their jobs. The following answers give us some insight into their motivation and dedication to Brooklyn A and housing law.

**Meah Clay, Esq.**
Senior Staff Attorney, Community & Economic Development Program

“Brooklyn A is the only nonprofit organization in NYC that provides transactional legal services to nonprofit organizations on such a comprehensive in-house scale similar to that of a private law firm. There are other nonprofit organizations that match nonprofit organizations with partner law firms for pro bono assistance, but Brooklyn A is the only nonprofit organization that provides such a full range of transactional legal services to nonprofit organizations in-house. In this way, we are able to get to know our clients, their needs, and missions at a deeply personal and professional level that is unmatched by any other experience currently available in New York City.”

“The most rewarding part about my job so far is, without a doubt, the diversity and range of community impact that my work allows. From helping arts organizations in their strategic growth efforts, to...”

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ensuring the long-term existence of a community-based health institution, to helping a nonprofit childcare organization acquire its first real estate property, the impact is widespread and, in many ways, immeasurable.

Alexandra Drimal, Esq.
Staff Attorney, Preserving Affordable Housing Program – Group Representation Unit

“I went to law school to become a poverty lawyer and to dedicate my life to service. I wanted to work at Brooklyn A because I knew it was the place where I could best realize those dreams. Luckily, I was right. At Brooklyn A, I get to zealously advocate for clients alongside brilliant and dedicated poverty lawyers and activists.”

“The most rewarding part of my job is empowering clients who have faced unimaginable adversity to join together and to fight for their rights both inside of court and out. As a Group Representation attorney, I help clients assert their agency and force the typically oppressive, classist, and racist court system to listen.”

Ana Granados
Legal Advocate, Preserving Affordable Housing Program – Group Representation Unit

“I wanted to work at Brooklyn A because I have always believed in a healthier and morally proficient community. I also believe in a better housing system in New York and Brooklyn A has given me the opportunity to try to achieve that.”

“What I find rewarding at this job is the unique and understanding connections I get from the different clients that I am fortunate enough to work with, who open my eyes to many new aspects of our community.”

Maria Julia Echart
Community Outreach and Intake Specialist, Preserving Affordable Housing Program – Group Representation Unit

“I decided to work with Brooklyn A because of the high human quality and compromise with the community needs of the entire team.”

“I feel honored to have the opportunity to work closely with the legal team to protect social justice.”

Jennifer Kubicki, Esq.
Senior Staff Attorney, Community & Economic Development Program

“I was drawn to Brooklyn A, and the transactional legal services work in the Community and Economic Development (CED) unit in particular, because of my interests in affordable housing and community development and my commitment to social justice.”

“Providing legal services to a wide scope of CED clients, from nonprofit community health centers to community facility and start-up organizations, has been the most rewarding part of my time at Brooklyn A thus far.”

Lina Lee, Esq.
Senior Staff Attorney, Preserving Affordable Housing Program – Group Representation Unit

“I joined Brooklyn A to be part of a community-based force that listens to and works for the low-income tenants and families by not only preserving affordable housing but by bringing affirmative cases to ensure that the homes that they live in are safe, habitable, and free from any form of harassment. With a holistic, multi-faceted, and coalition-led approach, Brooklyn A has held a unique responsibility and reputation for over 48 years as the leading legal services and advocacy organization that is trusted and relied upon by Brooklyn neighborhoods.”

“It has been an immensely rewarding experience working in the forefront during this housing crisis in New York, particularly Brooklyn, where low-income households are being driven out of their homes every single day while the remaining are struggling to keep up with stark increases in rent in this distorted, imbalanced, and discriminating housing market.”

Carmen Manzano
Legal Assistant and Intake Specialist, Preserving Affordable Housing Program – Group Representation Unit

“In my past work experiences I have been in the nonprofit sector, helping low-income families with resources in the community that they may not be aware of. I love that Brooklyn A is also helping low-income families be aware of their rights and privileges as citizens in this community.”

“That Brooklyn A, truly helps those in need and wants to definitively make an impact in Brooklyn.”

Rachel Nager, Esq.
Staff Attorney, Preserving Affordable Housing Program – Group Representation Unit

“Brooklyn A’s legacy of fierce advocacy inspired me as a legal intern [at Brooklyn A] in the summer of 2013. Since then, I always wanted to fight for its mission and clients, holding slumlords accountable and preserving affordable housing for the community.”

“The most rewarding part of my short time as a staff attorney has been getting to know my clients and helping them meet their goals. I felt satisfaction after I filed a motion and opposing counsel wanted to discontinuance as a response to my arguments in the motions.”

Kristie Ortiz, Esq.
Senior Staff Attorney, Preserving Affordable Housing Program – Individual Representation Unit

“I wanted to work at Brooklyn A in order to work in housing court, helping low-income and impoverished people save their apartments. I worked at a Guardian Ad Litem for a number of years in the housing court and I found great comfort in knowing that I was helping people. The reason I wanted to work at Brooklyn A was to push that to a whole new level.”

“The part of this job that is most rewarding is that our work matters, the significance of each motion, each answer has a tre-

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them on their tenant rights, which
me to “help, not to hurt.” Educating
my tenants, knowing that they trust
about my job is being trusted by
representation unit.”

“I wanted to work at Brooklyn A be-
cause I am interested in the intersec-
tion of housing, health, and environ-
mental justice.”

“So far, the most rewarding part of
the job is telling clients that they
have the power to make their landlord
make repairs in their units.”

“I wanted to work at Brooklyn A be-
cause I wanted to take the skills I
learned in prior legal settings and apply
them in the housing arena. Also, I care
deply about the quality of life of New
Yorkers. I have lived in New York City
my entire life, and I feel a strong con-
nection to its residents in all walks of
life. I wanted to use my time and energy
to contribute to the good of the City.”

“I really enjoy the satisfaction of
getting a good result in court for the
tenants we are representing. I like the
feeling of having made a real difference
in the lives of people who have not had
many people fight on their behalf.”

“I wanted to work for Brooklyn A be-
cause I wanted to "pay forward" what
was given to me. I am not only an em-
ployee; I am also a client in the group
representation unit.”

“What I have found most rewarding
about my job is being trusted by
my tenants, knowing that they trust
me to "help, not to hurt." Educating
them on their tenant rights, which
they had no understanding of. Seeing
the unity among them in wanting to
fight against their landlords who have
treated them unfairly.”

“My background and passion for civil
rights and fighting for justice.”

“I've found representing tenants
who display such bravery, spirit and
strength in the face of fear of losing
their longtime homes to be the most
rewarding aspect of the job so far. That
and working with a crackerjack team
of attorneys, legal workers, organizers,
and advocates who are so ferociously
committed to protecting tenants’
rights and fighting for justice.”

“The most rewarding part of this
job is helping clients to assert their
rights against unscrupulous landlords.”

“I came to Brooklyn A because of the
organization’s legal representation and
advocacy on behalf of low-income and
vulnerable communities. At its core,
Brooklyn A works to dismantle en-
trenched systemic injustice. Particu-
larly, Brooklyn A’s model of fighting to
protect tenants’ rights and to eradicate
housing discrimination aligns with
my background and passion for civil
rights. Brooklyn A’s comprehensive
approach of fighting fearlessly to pro-
tect the displacement of low-income,
often marginalized communities using
the courts and political process led me
to work here.”

“My model prioritizes the voices of
the community we are serving. This
is essential if we aspire to mitigate the
violence that our clients deal with.”

“By far, what I have found to be
most rewarding is the opportunity to
be on the ground and engage with ten-
ants face-to-face.”

“I wanted to work at Brooklyn A be-
cause we are working on the front
lines of the housing crisis in New York
providing legal representation to vul-
nerable families and individuals facing
eviction from their homes.”

“The most rewarding part of my
job is the opportunity to work directly
with families and individuals in their
fight to protect their homes.”
MEET THE INTERN:

Marcin Nadgorski

Marcin Nadgorski is a Pro Bono Scholar whom Brooklyn A had the pleasure of hosting during his final spring semester at Brooklyn Law School. The Pro Bono Scholars Program, created by former NYS Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman, allows students in their final year of law school to devote their last semester of study to performing pro bono service for low-income communities through an approved externship program. Marcin interned in our Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic.

Why did you choose tax law? "Last fall, I took the Federal Income Tax course at my school. Taking the course made me realize how difficult but, at the same time, how important tax law is. Since I knew that I may not have a chance to learn more about this area of law in the future, I decided that spending three months at Brooklyn A’s Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic, serving low-income taxpayers, would be very educational and rewarding at the same time.”

Why did you choose to intern at Brooklyn A’s Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic? "Very short commute and free coffee. More seriously, during my interview with Tamara del Carmen, Senior Staff Attorney, Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic, I learned about Brooklyn A’s mission. She also ensured me that my time at Brooklyn A would be very rewarding; that I will learn a lot and meet some great people. All of which turned out to be true.”

What have you found to be the most rewarding aspect of working in tax-law? ”Tax is a difficult area of law. Even the most basic forms are not very simple. The process of solving clients’ issues is often long. Being able to explain the process, make it more clear and understandable for clients, and at the same time getting positive results, are both very rewarding.”

What about the most challenging aspect? "Using my terrible Spanish to get information from clients who do not speak English, as we wait for an interpreter, has been very challenging, but has also made the clients laugh.”

Marcin graduated from Brooklyn Law School and was admitted to the New York State Bar in May 2016.

Making Policy Public

As the landscape of New York City steadily changes, with new developments and newcomers willing to pay more than many low-moderate income long-time residents can afford, there is the looming threat of displacement.

However, what many long-time tenants may not know is that succession rights exist to enable them to pass their rent-stabilized, rent-controlled, and Mitchell-Lama apartments onto their family members. While the process is complex and lengthy, preparing in advance and being aware of succession rights now can make the process of passing on an apartment much easier when the time comes.

In order to create greater awareness and help families claim their succession rights, Brooklyn A partnered with the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) and Everyday We to develop Pass It On! – a guide designed to provide step-by-step instructions on the succession process (in English and Spanish). Pass It On! helps families to know their rights, assert those rights, and recognize when it may be time to seek the help of a lawyer.

Grab your free copy at www.bka.org/Pass-It-On or email gramon@bka.org, with “Pass It On! Brochure” in the subject line, to request multiple copies.
The Young Professionals for Justice (YPJ) have had a very busy spring! As the group grows in membership it also grows in outreach. This past April, several YPJ members and Brooklyn A staffers participated in two community service activities with our community partners.

YPJ finished off their spring events with Ruckus for Justice, a fundraiser benefiting the work of Brooklyn A. The event was a huge success, generating a 30% increase in our fundraising goal from last year! Check out the community service activities below and Ruckus for Justice photos on the next page!
Raising a Ruckus!

Brooklyn A and Young Professionals for Justice send a big thank you to everyone who attended this year’s Ruckus for Justice, on May 26th! Months of planning and outreach culminated in a wonderful evening of socializing, dancing and supporting a great cause. Hosted again at Bedlam, in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, Ruckus for Justice gathered young professionals dedicated to supporting Brooklyn A’s mission of advancing social and economic justice. We enjoyed every minute of the night: the friends, the food, the music, the fun prizes all while raising a ruckus and raising money for Brooklyn A. See you next year!

Thank you to our sponsors and in-kind donors

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Young Professionals for Justice (YPJ) is a membership based group of professionals dedicated to supporting the work of Brooklyn A and raising awareness of the need for accessible legal services for low-moderate income individuals and communities in Brooklyn, and NYC wide. YPJ supports communities by promoting Brooklyn A’s efforts to sustain and develop vibrant, healthy communities and advocate for social justice.
Brooklyn A is proud to announce the appointment of Thomas McC. Souther as Chair of our Board of Directors.

Souther is a partner in the White Collar Litigation and Investigations Practice Group of Pepper Hamilton LLP’s New York office. He received his J.D. in 1984 from Fordham University School of Law. He has been on the Brooklyn A Board since 2002 and his affiliation goes back more than 30 years.

As Chair, he leads our 17-member Board as they guide the direction and operation of the organization. For the past six years, James H.R. Windels, Partner at Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP, served as Chair and will remain a Board member. Brooklyn A thanks Windels for his exemplary leadership and commitment for the past six years. We are excited to continue to move forward with the new leadership under Souther.

Along with Souther’s appointment, the Board of Directors also appointed the following directors as officers of the corporation: Valarie A. Hing, Partner at Curtis, Mallet-Prevost, Colt & Mosle LLP as Vice-Chair; Kenneth Mahon, President and C.O.O of DIME Savings Bank, as Treasurer; and Anne Pilsbury, Executive Director of Central American Legal Assistance, as Secretary.

See the side bar for a full listing of Board members. Biographies for all Brooklyn A Board members can be found on www.bka.org.

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