

Student Advocates Give Legal Aid, Hope to Battered Women

BY THE TIME QUEENS COUNTY FAMILY COURT opens its doors on any given weekday morning, moms, dads and assorted relatives, some with toddlers in tow, already are queued up halfway around the block. On a typically hectic morning, attorney Amelie Meyer makes her way through the court's crowded waiting area, looking around the room for those who've come to the court for protection against an abusive mate, and who—like the vast majority of people who show up at Family Court—don't have a lawyer.

Meyer, part of a nonprofit program called the Courtroom Advocates Project (CAP), is at the courthouse every Thursday, supervising law students trained to assist domestic violence victims in drafting petitions for orders of protection. Nine New York City law schools participate in CAP throughout the academic year, with summer associates from leading law firms in the city working for the program during July and August. "We teach our clients how the process works and about safety planning," explains Meyer. Meyer and CAP's other staff attorneys also represent those whose cases go into litigation.

Educating Victims Is Fundamental

With battering the major cause of injury to women in this country—exceeding auto accidents, muggings and rapes combined—Meyer's workweek is anything but serene. There are rewards, though, like the woman who wasn't quite ready to leave her abuser, then took CAP's aid and got the courage to make a fresh start. "We educated her on safety issues, got her a cell phone, and three days later she left her batterer, obtaining an order of protection and moving in with friends," Meyer says happily.

CAP is the brainchild of Jennifer Friedman, a dynamic,



CAP Director Jennifer Friedman (right) and Stacy Moran, CAP's program associate, review a client's file.

young lawyer who first got the idea for the program while serving as chair of Columbia Law School's Domestic Violence Project, a student-run advocacy program. Friedman, observing that many law students were genuinely interested in helping domestic violence victims, saw the possibility for a volunteer program located right in the courthouse. With the help of Sanctuary for Families, a large, New York-based social service provider for battered women which now houses CAP's offices, CAP was launched as a pilot in the Manhattan court in July 1997. The program has since been expanded to the family courts in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx.

One Woman's Story

Jessica Winters is one of the many who found help through CAP. Jessica tried numerous times to leave her dangerous situation—experts say the average abused spouse makes seven attempts to get away before finally succeeding—and was finally jolted into making a complete break from her husband after he attempted suicide. "We were able to save him, but that's when I knew that someone in that house was going to die if I didn't get out," she says.

After finding a confidential place to stay, *continued on page 2*

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Winters visited Manhattan Family Court to obtain an order of protection and seek custody of Allison, her only child. Winters' sister accompanied her to court that day, noticing a volunteer at the CAP table in the court's waiting room. Upon her sister's urging, Jessica approached the volunteer for assistance.

At the time, Winters felt terrified and emotionally overwhelmed. Alena, her student advocate, patiently helped Jessica to think through what she would tell the clerk who prepared her request for an order of protection. Friedman says that many battered individuals tend to minimize the violence, making their petitions less strong, adding, "Often they'll drop their cases or won't receive the legal remedies they're entitled to because they don't know how to articulate what happened to them."

Friedman arranged counseling for Winters and her daughter, also helping Jessica prepare for the criminal case against her husband, who Winters learned had been sexually abusing their daughter. Winters' husband was convicted in Criminal Court and there also were findings against him in Family Court. "Now my daughter and I can begin to move on with our lives," she says.

Providing Clients Essential Information

At the White Plains Family Court in Westchester County, the Family Court Legal Program—a partnership between the Women's Justice Center at Pace University and Westchester-Putnam Legal Services—provides legal services to individuals applying for orders of protection. The Mental Health Association of Westchester, which staffs a table at the court and greets all visitors, refers appropriate clients to the Family Court Legal Program.

An on-site program that is generously funded by the county, the Family Court Legal Program has helped hundreds of battered people since opening in October 1999. Staffers and students, who either earn school credit or salaries for their work as legal advocates, aid clients in obtaining orders of protection and assist with requests for child custody. The program collaborates with the county's child support office to expedite child support cases, in some instances making it possible for a client to leave the courthouse with a temporary order of support that first day. Emergency shelter and counseling also are arranged for those in need.

Amy Barasch, the program's director, works directly with clients, also acting as a mentor to the interns. Barasch, a journalist-turned-lawyer with a calm demeanor, says the program enables battered individuals to make informed decisions. "We arm them with information, so right off the

bat they know what's coming down the road and what their legal options are. Having this type of contact from the first day, and the reassurance that someone will be advocating for them, can make a very big difference," she says. Joan Cooney, Supervising Judge of the Family Courts in the counties of Westchester, Dutchess, Orange, Putnam and Rockland, adds that the interns, by interviewing their clients extensively and knowing what questions to ask, aid them in securing more appropriate orders of protection.

Taking A Holistic Approach

Barasch says that her clients are not inherently weak people, but that the combined psychological and physical abuse they consistently endure wears down their self-esteem, adding, "In turn, they become more and more isolated from the outside world. That's why you've got to address all the issues, take a holistic approach. After all, a woman's got to have a safe place to stay, be financially solvent, emotionally stable and so on, before she can leave her abuser and move forward."

The program's monthly 30 to 35 clients range from those on public assistance to the comfortably middle class. "It all depends on the options available to the client, whether the person has a supportive extended family, that kind of thing," says Barasch, who adds that special efforts are being made to reach out to domestic violence victims in the county's immigrant community. Many immigrants, because they can't speak English, are unemployed or in low-paying jobs and have few friends and relatives in the area, feel particularly trapped into staying with their batterers, Barasch explains. Also, the majority of those applying for U.S. citizenship through their spouses are unaware that as domestic violence victims they may be able to petition for citizenship separately from their partners—the type of vital information dispensed by programs like this that sometimes can mean the difference between life and death. ♦

All clients' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Experts advise victims of domestic violence to call 911 for help in an emergency. For information on victims' or batterers' programs and other resources, or to learn about volunteer opportunities, contact the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence at 1-800-942-6906 (English), 1-800-942-6908 (Spanish) or visit its Web site at www.opdv.state.ny.us.

NY Courts Launch Statewide Outreach Program

LET'S FACE IT. THE MAJORITY of Americans—and New Yorkers are no exception—know a lot more about their cars and computers than they do about their courts. "Ask most schoolchildren, or adults for that matter, who the chief justice of the United States Supreme Court is and they're likely to scratch their heads in response. They've never even heard of William Rehnquist," says William Thompson,

Building Trust Through Knowledge

According to Thompson, the only way to educate citizens about the judicial system and combat the misconceptions that many people have about the courts and the legal profession is to bring the courts to the people. And Courts 2000, a statewide educational outreach program aimed at all sectors of New York's citizenry—from elementary school

understanding of the other," comments Evelyn Frazee, a Monroe County Supreme Court justice who serves as Thompson's co-chair on the Committee to Promote Public Trust and Confidence in the Courts.

Following the media-judiciary talks, Courts 2000 sponsored a variety of events designed to enhance the general public's understanding of the court system. Courthouses upstate, downstate and in between held open houses, inviting local citizens to tour the facilities and talk with judges and court employees. Some visitors also got the chance to participate in a mock civil or criminal trial. These open houses, like the well-established tour programs in place in courts around the state, turned out to be quite a success, with many citizens taking part.

Courts 2000 also hosted special days for seniors, featuring seminars on retirement, elder care, estate planning, wills and other topics of concern to the over-50 set and their families. And last August 24th through Labor Day, thousands stopped by the Courts 2000 informational booth at the annual New York State Fair in Syracuse, where they could watch a video describing some of the court system's newest programs or sit at a laptop computer and access the New York courts' Web site (www.courts.state.ny.us). Judges, court officers and others were on hand to answer visitors' questions and distribute informational materials.

Outreach Efforts for 2001 and Beyond

Judge Thompson tells us not to be misled by the "2000" in Courts 2000, because there's a lot more to come. For instance, this spring judges throughout the state will be visiting local schools in honor of Law Day. *continued on page 4*



Albany Times Union reporter Melissa Grace (left) talks with Juanita Bing Newton, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives (right), and FOX News reporter Christine Steiner at Albany media-judiciary event.

who recently retired from New York State's Appellate Division and co-chairs the New York courts' Committee to Promote Public Trust and Confidence in the Legal System, a mix of jurists, lawyers, legislators, educators and business leaders formed in 1998 to build bridges between New Yorkers and their courts. The creation of the committee was prompted by a series of surveys conducted by the American Bar Association that revealed that the public, although they generally viewed the judiciary favorably, were less approving of the legal profession overall.

students to senior citizens—and an offshoot of Thompson's committee, has been doing just that.

Courts 2000 kicked off early last year with a series of dialogues between members of the judiciary and the media, with the two sides engaging in lively discussion about public access to information and other relevant issues. These informative exchanges took place in cities all around the state. "Both the Rochester and New York City dialogues I participated in were refreshingly honest, each side coming away with a little better

New York Judges' Group Takes on Bigotry

Here's the premise behind Not Just Blacks and Jews in Conversation, a group founded by two New York State judges to promote racial and religious harmony: bring young people of different races, ethnic backgrounds and religious affiliations together, get them to sit down and talk to each other, and more often than not, the stereotypes go right out the window. Starting out as Blacks and Jews in Conversation, the not-for-profit judges' organization was launched in the early nineties in response to escalating tensions between members of the African-American and Hasidic communities in Brooklyn's Crown Heights.

The group's original 12-member entourage—six African-American and six Jewish judges from the New York State courts—began paying visits to schools, places of worship and other institutions in and outside New York City, leading talks and workshops on how to get along in a multicultural society.

William Thompson, a recently retired associate justice of New York's Appellate Division who along with former State Supreme Court Justice Jerome Hornbliss came up with the concept for the group, says Blacks and Jews in Conversation was readily embraced by the public and quickly mushroomed, adding judges, guest speakers and audience participants from the Hispanic, Italian, Asian, gay and other communities to its ranks. Hence, the revised moniker.

Educator Yafa Berger runs a law and career program at a nontraditional high school in Brooklyn. She says the students at her school, many of them former dropouts, have benefited tremendously by participating in lectures and workshops run by Not Just Blacks and Jews in Conversation. "It's opened up a whole new world to my students, allowing them to mix with and learn about other cultures as well as share their views on issues ranging from discrimination to interfaith marriage." Berger adds that the judges also educate her high-schoolers about the justice system and career options in the courts, with some of the students getting the opportunity to work in the courts, interning for judges and court attorneys.

The organization's executive director, Shannon Taylor, a court attorney who arranges the group's lectures, court tours and other events, says the students immediately warm up to the judges—more than 200 jurists have been involved in the organization over the years—creating an instant rapport.

Since getting off the ground in 1993, Not Just Blacks and Jews in Conversation has touched the lives of thousands of high-schoolers and collegians, along with faculty members, community activists, religious leaders and others, from Brooklyn to Binghamton and beyond.



Not Just Blacks and Jews in Conversation co-founder Jerome Hornbliss addressing a group of teens from various NYC high schools.

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traditionally celebrated on May 1st and established in the 1950s as a day for Americans to reflect on their legal heritage. "We'll be running mock courts, engaging the young people and spreading the word about our judicial branch," he says, adding that Courts 2000 also has been collaborating with education experts, revising the school

curriculum to include more material about the judiciary and developing teaching aids to introduce youngsters to the court system.

Thompson himself is something of an expert when it comes to reaching out to schoolchildren and acquainting them with the workings of the courts. As the co-founder of Not Just Blacks and

Jews in Conversation, a not-for-profit coalition of New York State Supreme and Appellate Court judges with a strong commitment to fighting racism, anti-Semitism and all forms of hatred, he frequently addresses young people on both the dangers of bigotry and the important role our judicial system plays in everyday life (see above inset). ♦



Court All Smiles on Marathon Adoption Day

THERE WERE TEDDY BEARS, balloons and happy faces aplenty at New York City Family Court in lower Manhattan as court officials completed a record number of adoptions in one day—206—on the state's first Adoption Saturday, part of a special national campaign to expedite foster care adoptions around the country. The New York City event, along with similar ones in Chicago, Los Angeles and other U.S. cities, also focused attention on the plight of the many thousands of children nationally who, though eligible for adoption, still don't have a family or home to call their own. The nationwide initiative is the brainchild of the Alliance for Children's Rights, a not-for-profit organization that aids impoverished youngsters.

The 206 adoptions finalized at New York City Family Court on Adoption Saturday were consolidated from all five boroughs and handled centrally at the Manhattan court. Seventeen judicial hearing officers—including 13 Family Court judges—and their staffs as well as staff members from the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS), the city's child protective agency,

donated their time to the November 18th event, cramming a month's worth of adoptions into a single day.

ACS head Nicholas Scoppetta, himself a former foster child, says of the 32,000 children currently in foster care in New York City—there are about 50,000 foster children statewide and over half a million throughout the United States—some 12,000 are in need of permanent homes. "Our kids in foster care are with us until they are 18 years old. And then, if they don't get adopted or get returned home, they are on their own. And that is a pretty sad result. A kid needs a family for life," commented Scoppetta, as he addressed a jam-packed courtroom on Adoption Saturday.

"There are lots of kids out there who need love and attention," said Lester Rosario, who with wife Nancy and teenage daughter Rosemarie were at New York City Family Court on Adoption Saturday to make three-year-old Jayleen an official member of their family.

Nancy, who loves being around children, decided some years ago that she wanted to become a foster parent. The Rosario family took Jayleen into their home when she was just four days old. The girl's biological mother, who tried off and on to be a part of Jayleen's life but *continued on page 6*

Stars Light Up Courtroom During Juror Appreciation Week

"I'm shooting a lot of people in the movies lately, and so it's good to be on the other side," quipped actor-comedian John Leguizamo as he stood before a crowd of jurors, judges and court employees at Manhattan Supreme Court's jury assembly room. Following a recent juror stint, Leguizamo, at the downtown New York City courthouse this past November 16th to celebrate the state court system's fifth annual Juror Appreciation Week, was joined by several other high-profile types who'd also done their civic duty of late. Among them were State Senator Roy Goodman of Manhattan, TV news-woman Jane Hanson of NBC's "Today in New York," former New York Mets outfielder Art Shamsky, designer Vera Wang of bridal-gown fame, former Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messenger and actress Aida Turturro, who currently stars as Janice Soprano on the critically acclaimed HBO series, "The Sopranos."

"A free democracy depends upon an impartial court system," Senator Goodman, the first of the guest speakers, told the audience. Ms. Hanson, who joked that she must have been nervous when she showed up for jury duty because she hadn't noticed the large, historic murals decorating the walls of the assembly room, called jury service "an enlightening experience," adding that she made some new friends in the process.

The event was one of many held in courthouses around the state during the week of November 13th paying homage to the 600,000-plus jurors who serve in New York each year.



John Leguizamo, Aida Turturro, Jane Hanson and Senator Roy Goodman at November 16th juror appreciation ceremony.

