

One Woman's Journey from Legal Aid Client to Board President

BY KAREN GIFFEN

In 2011 Ilah Adkins was sworn in as the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland's board president — the first former client to hold the office. Her path from a troubled upbringing and hardships to law school and success was not traveled alone, but forged with the guidance of women attorneys. Today, Ilah is a vice president and legal counsel for Charter One. Her remarkable story is told here in a conversation with longtime friend and Legal Aid board member Karen Giffen.





YOU'VE RECENTLY FINISHED YOUR TERM AS LEGAL AID'S BOARD PRESIDENT. WHAT WERE THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THAT YEAR FOR YOU?

ILAH We had a really successful lift in individual donors, an increase of about 20% during 2011. This is important to me because it is only through funding that Legal Aid is able to do its work. By keeping the doors open for more people who struggle like I used to, Legal Aid can create successes that allow individuals to be productive members of our community. An additional highlight of the year was attending the Legal Aid Annual Dinner with the Honorable Congressmen John Lewis, a legendary civil rights leader and representative of Georgia's fifth district. It was an amazing event, and one that I am not soon to forget.

WE'VE BEEN FRIENDS A LONG TIME, AND I'VE WATCHED YOU GO THROUGH AN INCREDIBLE TRANSFORMATION. YOUR TIES WITH LEGAL AID DIDN'T START WITH YOUR TERM AS BOARD PRESIDENT, BUT AS A CLIENT. CAN YOU PROVIDE SOME INSIGHT INTO THE TURBULENCE THAT LED YOU TO LEGAL AID?

ILAH My life as a child was broken. My father abandoned my mother, leaving her alone to raise four children. When that proved to be too much, I was placed in the

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foster care system. I was thirteen years old at the time, and those circumstances left me feeling lost and confused. I attended at least six different high schools and lived with foster parents as well as in group homes. During my senior year of high school, I was emancipated from the foster care system. I knew that I had to graduate, so I worked where I could to get money to pay rent in a house occupied by Oberlin College students. I was just trying to survive.

WOULD YOU SAY THAT WAS YOUR LOWEST POINT?

ILAH No. I graduated from Oberlin High School in 1988. Soon afterward, I was married and pregnant with my daughter Samantha. I was only 19 years old. A year later, my son Mason was born. Now I had two children and an unhealthy marriage that was compounded by an alcohol addiction. That was my lowest point.

WHAT WAS THE TURNING POINT?

ILAH I remember the moment when I knew that I didn't want to stay in the place that I was, but I had no clue how to get out. I had been surrounded by bad situations and bad role models my whole life, and now I realized that I was becoming like them. I didn't want that for my children. I knew change had to start with me, which meant taking responsibility and getting help for my alcoholism.

WE BECAME FRIENDS AND TALKED ABOUT STRATEGIES THAT MIGHT HELP YOU MAKE THE NECESSARY CHANGES IN YOUR LIFE. COULD YOU DESCRIBE WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

ILAH I was sober a month before going to Legal Aid. It was 1995 when I walked into Legal Aid and met Alexandria Ruden,

who just happens to be one of the foremost attorneys in the country in domestic violence law. She understood that freeing me from my marital situation could provide a turning point in my life. She challenged me to use the opportunity that Legal Aid was giving me as a bigger platform — and she was persistent. With Alexandria's prodding, I realized that education was an important underpinning to any success that I was going to have for myself and for my children.

WHEN YOU MADE THE DECISION TO PURSUE YOUR BACHELOR'S DEGREE, DID YOU KNOW THAT YOU EVENTUALLY WANTED TO BE AN ATTORNEY?

ILAH Not really, I didn't have the confidence. However, I was intrigued by Alexandria and how she was changing lives for women and children by virtue of her education. Even though I graduated with honors from Cleveland State University, I still doubted my abilities. I took the LSAT and applied to Cleveland-Marshall College of Law in 2001, and was floored when I was accepted.

ARE THERE OTHER WOMEN ATTORNEYS THAT YOU LOOK TO AS MENTORS?

ILAH I am very fortunate to have met Judge Melody Stewart of the Eighth District Court of Appeals during my first year of law school. I was assigned to her as part of a formal mentoring program. Since then, we have remained friends and she has provided me with a lot of counsel on how to be a successful attorney. My relationship with Alexandria Ruden continues as well. She is an amazing role model, dedicating her life to giving back to people who have very special needs. There is no one else like her. She takes charge, and you come to know that the business will get done.

FUNDING-CUTS JEOPARDIZE LEGAL AID'S ABILITY TO SERVE

For 107 years Cleveland's Legal Aid Society has been a major force in Northeast Ohio by securing justice for those who are low income and vulnerable through high quality legal services. However, recent severe funding cuts are restricting the number of clients that Legal Aid can assist — people who rely on free legal services for basic needs such as housing, safety, food and healthcare.



Over the past two years, Congress has made budget cuts to Legal Aid's major national funding source, the Legal Services Corporation, that have resulted in a \$450,000 loss to Cleveland's Legal Aid Society. Compounded by a dramatic drop in interest income reserved for Legal Aid from attorney trust and escrow accounts (IOLTA Funding), **Legal Aid has lost 28% of its revenue in recent years.**

What can you do?

- 1) Volunteer.** Pro-bono opportunities range from a two-hour commitment at a Brief Advice and Referral Clinic to presenting at a community education event to providing extended representation. Go to our website, www.lasclev.org/volunteer, for more information or to register as a volunteer.
- 2) Donate.** Legal Aid is a nonprofit organization that has a significant economic impact on Northeast Ohio — in excess of \$40 million annually — representing the results of cases Legal Aid handles, such as homes saved, debt recovered, benefits restored and wages recovered. Your financial donation, no matter the amount, will make a difference in the life of an individual, as well as in the economic health of a wider community. Donate today at www.lasclev.org/donate.



SEVENTY PERCENT OF LEGAL AID CLIENTS ARE WOMEN. WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT FOR WOMEN TO HAVE ACCESS TO ATTORNEYS LIKE ALEXANDRIA RUDEN AND THE REST OF THE LEGAL AID STAFF?

ILAH Women tend to be faced with layers of complex issues. Unbundling those issues and seeing your way out of a situation can be very difficult to do on your own. Legal Aid is a great organization for helping with the multiple issues that many women face, like housing, education, job skills and other barriers to success.

WHY DO YOU THINK IT IS IMPORTANT FOR YOU TO TELL YOUR STORY, AND FOR OTHERS TO HEAR IT?

ILAH First, it's important for corporations to hear my story because they need to know that out of Legal Aid's successes come potential workforce-ready employees — people who can get past barriers and become contributing members of society. In order for Legal Aid to do that well, it needs corporate funding to augment contributions being made by the legal community. The other piece of this is that my story illustrates more than facts and figures about the work of Legal Aid. It's a personal story that resonates with people, and can help Legal Aid be successful in fundraising as well as encouraging other attorneys to volunteer their services. I am open in sharing my weaknesses and strengths so that I can help someone else. I've come full circle to the place I started from, but in a very different capacity with very different skills — I am able to add value at this time. If it weren't for Legal Aid, I don't know if I would enjoy the success I have today.



Karen L. Giffen is a partner at Giffen & Kaminski, LLC. Her practice focuses on business litigation. She can be reached at (216) 621-5161, or at kgiffen@thinkgk.com.



Ilah Adkins is Vice President and Director of Legal Services for Charter One and RBS Citizens. She is the immediate Past-President of the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cleveland, and also serves on the Board of the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center. She can be reached at (216) 277-0702, or at iadkins@charteronebank.com.