

# poetic justice

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## Legal Aid's Annual Report to the Community focuses on "*The Presence of Justice*"

On the evening of Friday, September 10, Legal Aid was honored with a visit by The Honorable Sonia Sotomayor, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, who spoke at "The Presence of Justice," Legal Aid's Annual Report to the Community. The public event attracted nearly 1,300 legal professionals, members of the judiciary, civic leaders and community partners to the Renaissance Cleveland Hotel's Grand Ballroom.

Legal Aid Executive Director Colleen Cotter explained the evening's theme, which was taken from the writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "In Dr. King's view, a just world is one in which everyone is treated with dignity . . . Every day we at Legal Aid work to push back against exploitation, and, in so doing, to bring a sense of dignity to our clients."

Brenda Vera, a Lincoln-West High School senior, spoke about her family's struggle with domestic abuse; Legal Aid helped her mother get a divorce and stay safely in the United States with her five daughters. Ms. Vera is an aspiring attorney who spent time with Legal Aid staff through the Stephanie Tubbs Jones Summer Legal Academy.

After an introduction by The Honorable Solomon Oliver, Jr. – Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court, Northern District of Ohio, Justice Sotomayor addressed Ms. Vera: "Brenda, every once in a while everyone tires of the work they are doing. Every time that happens to me in the future, I'll think of you."

The Justice went on to highlight the importance of legal services: "Legal aid societies are crucial to insuring that the least privileged and most vulnerable in our society have access to justice."

During her September visit to Cleveland, Associate Justice Sotomayor attended private events with Case Western Reserve University Law School and Cleveland-Marshall School of Law students, Federal judges and members of the Hispanic Roundtable.

The evening ended with a dessert reception in an adjacent ballroom, featuring entertainment by talented members of the Northeast Ohio legal community – known as the No Name Band.

Retired Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Judge Burt W. Griffin led the host committee that organized the Legal Aid event, which was Justice Sotomayor's only public appearance while visiting Cleveland. *See more photos from "The Presence of Justice" on page 8.* ●



**The Honorable Sonia Sotomayor, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.**

### Inside this issue:

**On page 2,** Legal Aid helps Puerto Rican community.

## Legal Aid helps Puerto Rican community apply for new birth certificates

In December 2009, the Puerto Rican government made a surprising announcement: all birth certificates issued in the U.S. territory would become null and void on July 1, 2010. Individuals born in Puerto Rico any time before that date would have to file for a new birth certificate.

The policy was intended to curb alleged fraud with existing birth certificates. It also presented a challenge for Northeast Ohio's large Puerto Rican population, who are U.S. citizens by birth.

Legal Aid immediately recognized the impact this situation would have on Puerto Ricans in Northeast Ohio – especially those who are low income. Says staff attorney Megan Sprecher, “We wanted to make sure low-income Puerto Ricans were informed about the change and the application process in order to prevent future problems. Valid birth certificates are often required for important life activities like school enrollment and obtaining government-issued ID.”

Legal Aid collaborated with partner agencies and distributed literature about the change. Legal Aid representatives targeted Spanish-language media outlets and held clinics on Cleveland's West Side and Lorain County to help individuals fill out birth certificate applications. Legal Aid established a toll-free hotline to assist anyone with questions.

When the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles refused to recognize Puerto Rican birth certificates for those seeking state I.D. cards, Ms. Sprecher and Baker Hostetler attorney José C. Feliciano published an op-ed in *The Plain Dealer*: “Valid ID is the gateway to important activities like working, driving to a job, opening a bank account and taking the GED exam. For Puerto Ricans, valid ID is also necessary in order to get a new birth certificate issued by Puerto Rico.”

As of this printing, the Puerto Rican government had extended its deadline through October, giving many more time to get a revised birth certificate. ●



**Lynette Feliciano, Legal Aid Intake Specialist, assists at a Puerto Rican Birth Certificate Clinic hosted by The Spanish-American Committee.**



## Volunteer Profile:

### Anne Owings Ford

**McDonald Hopkins** Co., LPA  
Attorneys at Law

McDonald Hopkins attorney Anne Owings Ford is committed to Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program (VLP). An active *pro bono* attorney, Ms. Ford sees her service as a reminder "that I am a member of the community; that I don't remain floating from work to home in my own little bubble."

Ms. Ford's first *pro bono* client through Legal Aid was an elderly woman who was sued over a real estate sale. Ms. Ford was able to get a positive outcome for her client, and was energized by the experience. After one meeting, Ms. Ford remembers, "at the elevators [my client] turned to me and said 'Anne Ford, you are my friend'; and she meant it."

Ms. Ford often volunteers with colleagues from McDonald Hopkins at VLP's neighborhood Brief Advice and Referral Clinics. She was also instrumental in the development and ongoing success of the McDonald Hopkins Juvenile Court *Pro Se* Clinic where volunteer attorneys, supported by mentors from the Juvenile Court, the Cuyahoga Support Enforcement Agency and Legal Aid, provide advice to individuals with child support issues.



Anne Owings Ford, Esq. at a recent VLP clinic.

**"...[my client] turned to me and said 'Anne Ford, you are my friend'; and she meant it."**

Ann McGowan Porath, Managing Attorney of the Volunteer Lawyers Program observes, "The ongoing partnership between Anne and Legal Aid creates meaningful *pro bono* opportunities for attorneys in Northeast Ohio." Beyond her work with Legal Aid, Ms. Ford is the immediate past chair of the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association's Justice For All (JFA) committee, which oversees and coordinates the CMBA's many public service activities. Ms. Ford believes in recruiting young attorneys for *pro bono* services. "It is important to volunteer as a lawyer and give financially. Legal Aid gives us the best avenue to do that. There is a wealth of opportunity for every lawyer in Cleveland to do something." ●

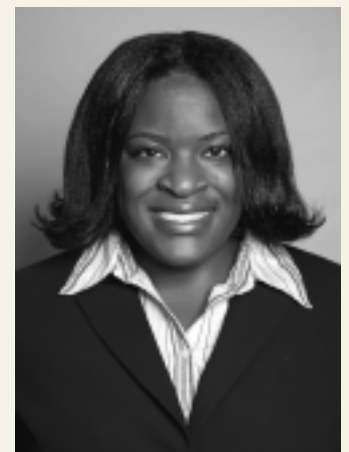
## Legal Aid helps Lorain mother fight utility shut-off

Lorain resident Kristin Seljan's electricity bill was almost double the usual amount, and she quickly discovered the reason. The landlord was allowing the other tenants in the two-family home to run a cord from her residence; Ms. Seljan was paying both families' electricity costs. When she complained to the landlord, the landlord had the electricity turned off.

For Ms. Seljan, the electricity shut-off was more than just an inconvenience. Her two-year old daughter was asthmatic and needed breathing treatments from an electric machine when her condition was aggravated.

Ms. Seljan came to Legal Aid's Lorain County Office, where staff attorney Amanda Davis recognized a familiar situation. She observed, "There are a lot of utility shut-offs because landlords think that is the quickest way to evict people. You find that a lot of them shut off the gas, electricity or water – rather than issuing the three-day eviction notice."

Ms. Davis knew that, regardless of any disagreement with a tenant, the landlord was legally obligated to keep the utilities on. She initiated a conference call with Ohio Edison, the landlord and Ms. Seljan. The electricity was restored the next day, and Ms. Seljan was able to breathe a little easier. ●



Amanda Davis, Esq.

## Legal Aid helps domestic violence survivor through divorce

An immigrant from Kuwait, Nahida Farunia has been an exemplary citizen of Lakewood for more than twenty years. She works as a daycare teacher and an Arabic interpreter. She volunteers for the community at every opportunity. Ms. Farunia started an organization to help other Arab-American women adjust to life in the United States; the work earned her a feature in *Cleveland Magazine's* 2003 "Most Interesting People" issue and a Lakewood City Council resolution.

However, Ms. Farunia was living a nightmare at home. Her husband was abusive and controlling. He believed he "owned the family." Ms. Farunia didn't have the financial independence to leave and stayed in the marriage for the sake of her five children.

But in 2006, during one particularly bad fight, Ms. Farunia reached her limit. "I hadn't raised my voice in twenty-eight years," she said, "But I was like a cup that finally spilled over."

Neighbors heard noise and called the police; the husband was taken away in handcuffs, yelling threats to his family. Ms. Farunia

secured a protection order and called a family meeting with her children to tell them she intended to divorce their father. The children were all supportive of their mother's decision. The youngest, then eleven years old, told her "enough is enough." Ms. Farunia says proudly, "I am honored to have my kids."

Ms. Farunia had referred other women to Legal Aid in the past. Now, she was ready to take the same step. Alexandria Ruden, Senior Attorney in the Family Law Unit, represented her and stayed by her side through a contentious four-year divorce process.

Ms. Farunia remembers the exact day her divorce was finalized, "April 7, 2010 was my 'freedom date'." She is grateful for the support of her children, friends and employer, Holy Name Family Center, which allowed a flexible schedule for her to attend court dates. Ms. Farunia is also deeply grateful to Ms. Ruden, who helped her get the house deed transferred into her name after the divorce, "She has a big heart. I still call her to check on her. I feel like [Alexandria and I] are friends more than she's my lawyer." ●



Nahida Farunia at her Lakewood home.



### Partner Profile: Cleveland Clinic Legal Department

Attorneys from Cleveland Clinic have partnered with Legal Aid to extend the hospital's community commitment beyond medical care. Legal Aid board member and Cleveland Clinic attorney Betsy Rader leads the collaboration between her workplace and Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program (VLP). The Legal Department staffed its first VLP Brief Advice and Referral Clinic in 2008 and recently staffed another event at Cleveland's Langston Hughes Center on Quincy Avenue.

Ms. Rader's passion for *pro bono* comes

from personal experience, "I remember how difficult things were for my family. I was lucky enough to have full scholarships to Ohio State University and Yale Law School, and have felt the need to give back ever since."

Rosie Wenstrup, Associate Counsel at the Cleveland Clinic, volunteered at her first clinic in October. She says, "[The clinic] was very different from what I typically do. I negotiate and draft technological and IT licensing agreements. It was nice to meet face-to-face with an individual who might be personally helped by what we were doing." ●

Betsy Rader, Esq., Cleveland Clinic Legal Department, at a VLP Brief Advice and Referral Clinic.





## Profile: Intake Unit

The Intake Unit is Legal Aid's triage department. When a potential client calls Legal Aid or walks into a county office, a member of the intake staff is on hand to assess the situation. "Every call is handled by an individual," says Margaret Terry, Senior Attorney for the department. Intake specialists interview clients, parse their information and determine if the client is eligible for Legal Aid's services. Adds Ms. Terry, "The goal is to give the client some direction and meaningful assistance. If we don't take the case, we at least try to send them a brochure or refer them to someone who can help."

The largest challenge for the department is the sheer number of people seeking assistance. In a given day, intake staff in the Cleveland office speak to more than fifty potential clients. The Elyria, Jefferson and Painesville offices, where receptionists double as intake specialists, face the same issue. Ms. Terry notes the demands on the Intake Unit increased as the economy worsened, and the situation is often frustrating.

Still, intake specialists are among some of longest-serving employees at Legal Aid, with more than 150 years of combined experience. Intake Specialist Ivia Hobbs, who celebrates her fortieth anniversary with Legal Aid this fall, explains: "I've stuck around because of the people. Legal Aid is a very caring employer. That's rare – and exceptional." ●



**Barbara Simmons, Intake Specialist,**  
helps a caller seeking legal assistance.

## Donor Profile: Susan Becker

Susan Becker never intended to have a legal career – she studied journalism as an undergraduate and planned to work for a newspaper. After four years as a reporter, Ms. Becker grew weary of the limited options in her chosen field. She decided to enroll in law school to further develop her writing skills. During Ms. Becker's first week at Cleveland State University's Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, she "fell in love" with her new discipline.

She graduated magna cum laude and went on to clerk for the U.S. Court of Appeals and practiced litigation at Jones Day. She also began to teach part-time at her alma mater. When an opportunity arose for a full-time teaching position, Ms. Becker "jumped at it."

Ms. Becker is now a full, tenured professor at Cleveland-Marshall and recipient of the 2010 CSU Distinguished Faculty Award for Teaching. Her courses include Civil Procedure, Legal Ethics, and Sexual Orientation and the Law.

She is also a regular donor to Legal Aid. Ms. Becker, who serves as Board President of the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio, says, "Legal Aid helps so many people in a given year, it's a phenomenal return on the investment."

Additionally, Ms. Becker encourages her students to "use the law to advocate for change – for an individual client or to change the world." She adds: "A law degree is an amazing privilege and I think carries with it the responsibility to help people who haven't had the opportunities in life. You have the knowledge, and a small act of kindness makes a profound impact." ●



**Susan Becker, Esq. in her Cleveland-Marshall office.**

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## “Save the Dream” and Legal Aid help Lake and Geauga Counties establish foreclosure mediation

In the summer of 2008, Legal Aid, a partner in the statewide foreclosure prevention program “Save the Dream,” held foreclosure trainings for attorneys throughout Northeast Ohio. After a session in Geauga County, Court of Common Pleas Judge Forrest W. Burt approached Legal Aid staff attorney Thomas Mlakar. Judge Burt expressed interest in establishing a foreclosure mediation program for Geauga. This conversation led to a series of meetings between Legal Aid, Judge Burt and his colleague Judge David L. Fuhry. Lake County Common Pleas Judge Eugene A. Lucci also joined the effort to establish programs in the area. Legal Aid collaborated with partners in both counties and offered input on the proposed rules and forms.

Now the communities have programs with part- or full-time mediators hired by the courts. And the mediation programs are making a difference.

Marley Eiger, supervising attorney at Legal Aid’s Painesville office, used to average about one foreclosure case each year – now she annually handles close to eighty. Ms. Eiger calls mediation a “godsend,” observing, “[Homeowners are] panicking, they’re afraid of what they’re facing. If they didn’t have this program, they would be stuck with dealing things on their own – the lender is somewhere else in the country. The notices and terms are inconsistent. It is totally bewildering.”



Marley Eiger, Esq.



Thomas Mlakar, Esq.

Mr. Mlakar, says the programs are a “win-win” for communities: “We see results in negotiation that may or may not happen in litigation. Our average on resolving cases through our litigation program is forty to fifty hours; we get the same results in mediation in about four to five hours. That should be an impetus for judges to have a program for people who may not have a defense, but now are in a position to pay and cure this.” Mr. Mlakar also credits Judge Mary Jane Trapp, Presiding and Administrative Judge of Ohio’s Eleventh District Court of Appeals, for her support.

Adds Ms. Eiger, “We joined forces to save people’s homes – not just our clients’ home, the value of homes in these communities. The mediation program effects the community and the soundness of the economy.” ●

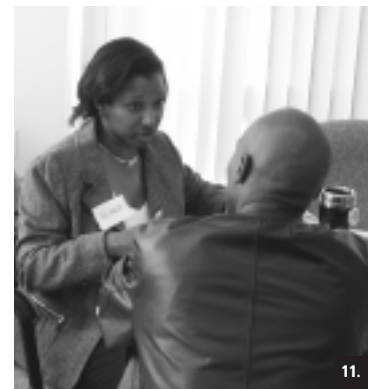
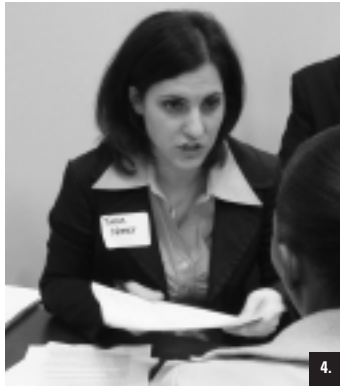


## Volunteer Lawyers in Action

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2. **Edward Brice, Esq.** (Newman & Brice) and **Marni Santoro, Esq.**
3. **Jerry Schaefer, Esq.** (Cleveland Clinic Foundation)
4. **Tania Nemer, Esq.** (McGinty, Gibbons, Hillow & Spellacy Co. LPA)
5. **Attorneys from Wickens, Herzer, Panza, Cook & Batista Co.:** (TOP L-R)  
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**Francis Gardner, Esq.**  
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**Joseph Cirigliano, Esq.**  
**Amy DeLuca, Esq.**  
**William Kolis, Esq.**
6. **Ann Bergen, Esq.** (Legal Aid’s Board of Directors)  
**Colleen Cotter, Esq.** (Legal Aid’s Executive Director; CMBA Board of Directors)  
**Mike Ungar, Esq.** (Ulmer & Berne and CMBA President)  
**Barbara Roman, Esq.** (Meyers, Roman, Friedberg & Lewis; CMBA Incoming President)
7. **Mark Merims, Esq.** (Notre Dame College)
8. **Patrick Leary, Esq.**
9. **Daniel Thiel, Esq.**
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**Dennis Terez, Esq.** (Federal Public Defender)  
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**Karen Neilsen, Esq.** (NLRB) (FRONT L-R)  
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**Deborah Coleman, Esq.** (Hahn Loeser + Parks)  
**Teresa Dirksen, Esq.** (U.S. Attorney’s Office)  
**Maria Del Monaco, Esq.** (FTC)  
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11. **Renee Bacchus, Esq.**



# Volunteer Lawyers Program [vlp]







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