



# Poetic Justice

Volume 17 Issue 2 Summer 2020

Stories of Philanthropy and Hope from *The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland*

## Legal Aid’s Continued COVID Response

The coronavirus pandemic cast a spotlight on existing inequities and systemic barriers to opportunity in our society – then proceeded to exacerbate these issues.

In response, Legal Aid has not slowed down or paused any critical services during this time of great community need. On the contrary, we’ve expanded programs, hired new staff, and doubled down on advocacy efforts as the challenges of poverty are intensifying and affecting more people. Online intake is open 24/7 and phone intake is available during select business hours. Our staff are in touch with their clients and partners via phone, text, video, and email. Through all this, remote work remains the default for Legal Aid’s entire team of nearly 100 staff, with a limited number of staff at the office to handle emergency matters, filings, and urgent in-person tasks.

We’ve helped many people throughout Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, and Lorain counties with challenges related to the pandemic over the past few months. Below are some of their stories. *(All names have been changed to protect client privacy.)*

### Laurie’s Story

Laurie lives in private housing with her three sons. To pay her monthly rent, she uses cash assistance she gets from Ohio Works First, and her son helps cover the rest with his income from working for a food delivery service. Unfortunately, Laurie’s son’s income dipped dramatically due to the COVID19 pandemic, and the family has been unable to pay rent. Laurie reached out to Legal Aid for help.

Laurie’s Legal Aid attorney, Karen Wu, secured three months of rental assistance from EDEN, an agency that is administering funds set aside by the county for emergency rent relief. Attorney Wu coordinated the gathering of necessary documents, helped Laurie complete her application, and negotiated with Laurie’s landlord, who agreed to accept the late rent and not evict her. Laurie’s application was recently approved, and she covered her rent for March, April, and May.



Karen Wu, Esq.

### Molly’s Story

Molly was temporarily unable to work at her job at a day care around the time of the statewide Stay at Home orders. Several weeks later, she was called back to work as day care was officially considered an “essential service.” As a young single mother, she was unable to find childcare for her own young children and was therefore not able to return to work. This led to a discontinuation of her unemployment compensation.

Molly called Legal Aid for help and was referred to Legal Aid’s new Virtual Advice Clinic. Volunteer attorney Jason Dawicke, Esq. counseled Molly that she should be entitled to benefits through the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act. Attorney



Jason Dawicke, Esq.

Dawicke worked with Molly to develop a plan to appeal the decision and apply for relief under the CARES Act. Molly is now receiving her unemployment benefits as well as an extra \$600 a week through the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) program. These benefits were Molly’s sole source of financial support during the pandemic while she couldn’t have child care.

### Tanya’s story

Tanya is a single adult who lives in a Cleveland suburb. The local court ordered a 45-day moratorium on evictions, but Tanya’s landlord would have none of it – he wanted her out, and locked her out of her apartment during a period when the Ohio governor had ordered



Maria Smith, Esq.

everyone to stay at home. Tanya sought help from Legal Aid, and a team of lawyers, led by Legal Aid attorney Maria Smith, prepared to file for a temporary restraining order. However, once opposing counsel learned of Legal Aid’s engagement, Ms. Jones got new keys to her apartment. Having an attorney by her side saved Tanya from endangering her health and losing her home.

Learn more about Legal Aid’s COVID-19 response at [www.lasclev.org/coronavirus](http://www.lasclev.org/coronavirus).



Barbara Roman, Esq. counseling a Legal Aid client in 2019

## Volunteer Profile: Barbara Roman

"She's a real role model to me," says Ann Porath, Esq., Managing Attorney of Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program, about Barbara Roman, Esq. Barbara, a partner at Meyers Roman, is a Legal Aid Board Member and

also serves as Chair of Legal Aid's *Pro Bono* Committee.

For over a decade, Barbara has vigorously encouraged fellow attorneys to use their expertise to serve low-income residents of Northeast Ohio. In 2011, as President of the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association (CMBA), Roman expanded the organization's 3Rs program, which brings volunteer attorneys to high schools in Cleveland and East Cleveland to teach constitutional law to tenth graders. During Barbara's tenure, 3Rs expanded to also provide mentorship for juniors and seniors as they prepare for college and seek scholarships. "Barbara played a crucial role in spreading awareness about these opportunities for attorneys to step-up," Ann says.



Pre-COVID-19, at a Legal Aid clinic: Barbara Roman, Esq. (right) with Legal Aid Board members Matt Nakan, Esq. and Rita Maimbourg, Esq.

Like any great leader, Barbara leads by example. A regular at Legal Aid's brief advice clinics, she often takes on complicated cases. "She has always stepped up," says Ann. "Barbara has handled some of the most complicated family law cases."

A few months ago, Roman concluded a case with client Erica Parks (*name changed to protect client privacy*), a devoted mother of two. Erica works nights and still gets up early to make sure her kids are ready for school. When her husband was unfaithful then filed for divorce, Erica had no support network to lean on – until Barbara stepped up. Barbara helped Erica navigate the divorce process while juggling her busy schedule. The case ended positively, with Erica winning \$592 in monthly child support. Inspired by her experience with Barbara, Erica is currently attending nursing school to advance her career.

In addition to her work with individual clients, Roman led the expansion of Legal Aid's *Pro Se Divorce* clinics into *Pro Se Divorce Plus* clinics. *Pro Se* clinics typically attract 10 – 15 people per month and last a few hours. They begin with a presentation from the leading volunteer attorney, who then opens up the session for assistance with paperwork and questions. *Pro Se Plus* Clinics run every other month and are designed to address slightly more complicated cases, such as cases involving children.

Roman continues to create new ways to serve clients. Through her involvement with the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association, she is recruiting attorneys to help with Legal Aid's Say Yes to Education work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she has also been helping Legal Aid organize Virtual Advice Clinics for family law cases.

Barbara Roman's career has impacted many people and families over the years. Greater Cleveland is fortunate to have such a loyal advocate.



### #TakeACase

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of Cleveland  
Since 1965

## Volunteer Lawyers Needed!

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Take a Case — Sign-up to help with COVID-specific needs — Help flatten the curve of evictions — and more!

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## The Campaign for Legal Aid

**EXTENDING THE REACH OF JUSTICE**

The Campaign for Legal Aid will expand Legal Aid's reach and grow our programs. Members of Legal Aid's Campaign Cabinet came together via Zoom in early June to review the success of year 2 and look forward to the beginning of year 3 of this growth effort. To date, we have raised \$13 million of the \$15 million goal.

While attendees were physically present in different rooms, the meeting felt intimate, and represented a powerful example of community leaders coming together to support a common cause.

At the June 1 meeting, conversation included discussion of the previous weekend's protests against our nation's abhorrent legacy of systemic racism and police brutality. Guest speakers Ronn Richard of the Cleveland Foundation and David Abbott of the Gund Foundation spoke frankly about Cleveland's struggles, the resiliency of its people, the importance of continuing to fight for justice and change, and the important role Legal Aid plays to extend justice.

Legal Aid is grateful for this passionate, dedicated group of individuals leading The Campaign for Legal Aid. We thank each for helping to amplify the important message of Legal Aid's work, and sharing what Legal Aid is doing to promote positive change throughout Northeast Ohio.

### The Campaign for Legal Aid's Cabinet:



Campaign Co-Chairs Doug Wang (Retired, Northern Trust Bank), Jan Roller (Giffen & Kaminski), and Dick Pogue (Jones Day) with Honorary Chair Paul Harris (KeyCorp)

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## Cleveland Browns Coach Stefanski Addresses Legal Aid Ambassadors



Coach Stefanski addressing with Legal Aid's law firm and corporation ambassadors

On June 4th, Legal Aid hosted a Zoom event to welcome our 2020 Partners In Justice, who are Legal Aid ambassadors at more than 60 law firms and corporations. These engaged supporters help encourage financial

and volunteer support and increase the community's understanding of Legal Aid. As the meeting came to a close, Legal Aid surprised everyone with a very special guest: Cleveland Browns Head Coach, Kevin Stefanski.

Coach Stefanski shared his perspective on the importance of Legal Aid and legal representation in this country. He said he has held team meetings with the Browns to discuss what they can do to help battle racism and injustice in our society. Finally, Coach Stefanski commended Legal Aid and our Partners in Justice for the way we are helping the community "right there on the front line."

## Racial Justice

Our nation and our community are experiencing a national reckoning with systemic racism. The conversation shines a spotlight on poverty, oppression and racism that are rooted in slavery. This harmful legacy is a reality in our community and our nation. Since 1905, Legal Aid has fought for equality and justice. Legal Aid stands with our community for justice and peace. We grieve with those who experience the violence of racism.

### Legal Aid pledges to:

- Remove barriers erected by racism and address the impact of centuries of racism on individuals and families. The vestiges of racism prevent too many Brown and Black people from securing health, safety, shelter and economic security.
- Identify biases and inequitable systems within our organization – and then take steps to eradicate those biases and inequities, so that Legal Aid demonstrates values of diversity, equity and inclusion.
- Work in partnership with others to design and implement systemic solutions to systemic racism.
- Raise the awareness of our staff and board and the community about the systems that contribute to racism, the impact of systemic racism and the intersection of racism and poverty.
- Stand in solidarity with the oppressed and ignored in our community. Black lives matter.

## #ChangeIsHappening

In recent months, we have seen a steady flow of new and renewed contributions to Legal Aid, and we are grateful for our strong community support.

To thank our supporters, Legal Aid recently created and shared videos about how our programs have expanded as we continue our work to extend justice.

Each video in our “Change is Happening” series focuses on one aspect of Legal Aid’s services. For example, there are videos for each of our legal practice areas: health and opportunity, family law, economic justice, and housing. We’ve also incorporated details about Legal Aid’s response to COVID -19, our improved intake processes, and client success stories.

Highlights from the videos include:

**Cleveland City Council** members **Blaine Griffin** and **Phyllis Cleveland** discuss how important Legal Aid’s services are for constituents in their wards. They both emphasize how Legal Aid listens to neighborhood residents and collaborates with local partners to make change.

**Legal Aid Managing Attorney Katie Feldman** shares how her team has continued to promote healthy communities by ensuring access to crucial resources for families. Katie’s work with our partners has helped expedite the process of applying for food assistance benefits (SNAP) in Cuyahoga County. This has led to faster turn-around times for applications decisions during COVID-19.

**Legal Aid Senior Attorney Alexandria Ruden** shares how our Family Law practice group protects victims of domestic violence in a multitude of ways. During COVID-19, Legal Aid has secured emergency civil protection orders and worked with area courts to eliminate the requirement for notarized affidavits.

**Quo Vadis Cobb**, General Counsel, Global Market Access & Litigation at **Rockwell Automation** and Legal Aid Board Member, remarks on the confluence of challenges that have dominated 2020 and why Legal Aid is more important now than ever before – because our mission has always been to create a more just and equitable society.

**John Corlett**, President and Executive Director at the **Center for Community Solutions**, praises Legal Aid’s long-term, positive effects on the families and individuals we serve. In 2019, John’s team interviewed former clients and completed a study on Legal Aid’s impact; learn more at [www.LegalAidImpact.org](http://www.LegalAidImpact.org)

**Legal Aid Senior Attorney Jessica Baaklini** shares how she has made certain our Medical Legal Partnership with MetroHealth can continue to provide comprehensive supports to families during COVID-19. She has kept in touch with providers to communicate about referrals and cases, and even leads virtual training sessions on how to identify when a legal issue is affecting patient health.

See more terrific video testimonials at [www.lasclev.org/ChangeIsHappening](http://www.lasclev.org/ChangeIsHappening).

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# Legal Aid Applauds CMBA's Leadership and Partnership

The connection between Legal Aid and the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association (CMBA) is long-standing and unique, and the larger community has benefited greatly from this special partnership.



"The CMBA and Legal Aid make a formidable team," says Rebecca Ruppert McMahon, Chief Executive Officer of the CMBA. "Through our collaboration, we help promote a culture of *pro bono* service in the bar, and work to ensure our legal community is looked to as a leader in the United States, promoting civil legal services for the poor."

All Legal Aid attorneys are members of the CMBA, and many are also involved in various committees and sections. The CMBA code stipulates that a board position is reserved for Legal Aid's Executive Director. This ensures that Legal Aid has a voice in policy discussions, and the perspectives and interests of our client community are represented. Legal Aid's Board includes several past CMBA Presidents and current leaders.

Legal Aid and the CMBA share core values, including a commitment to promoting public service and community engagement among private attorneys. Together, CMBA and Legal Aid have long partnered on multiple *pro bono* programs, including *pro se* divorce clinics, bankruptcy clinics, and most recently, Say Yes to Education, which launched its Cleveland chapter in 2019. Another important CMBA initiative was precipitated by the onset of COVID-19: a bench-bar task force to facilitate consistency and collaboration among Northeast Ohio's court systems.

## Say Yes to Education



In 2018, Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) CEO Eric Gordon had an idea to pilot legal clinics for CMSD parents. He consulted with the president of the CMBA for help establishing such a program, and the CMBA in turn reached out to Legal Aid to collaborate on the project.

Based on the learnings from this pilot, the CMBA and Legal Aid were well-positioned to serve the legal needs of CMSD families with the launch of Say Yes to Education Cleveland.

Say Yes to Education is a nonprofit that provides scholarships and supportive services to low-income students at public schools. In 2019, Say Yes established a chapter in Cleveland.

Together, Legal Aid Executive Director Colleen Cotter and Rebecca Ruppert McMahon teamed up to co-chair the Say Yes to Education-Cleveland Legal Services Task Force and designed a system for connecting families in need with free legal assistance. The program includes Legal Aid staff, CMBA staff and leaders, staff from partner organizations, and *pro bono* volunteers. This partnership leverages CMBA and Legal Aid strengths. The CMBA is leading recruitment of volunteer attorneys by leveraging its communications and stature in the legal community. Legal Aid provides intake and referral services, supports volunteers, and directly provides legal assistance to CMSD families. The CMBA is helping to recruit volunteer attorneys by leveraging its communications and outreach. The combined strength of CMBA and Legal Aid sends a powerful message to local lawyers who want to be effective advocates for justice when they engage in public service.

## COVID-19 and the Courts



COVID-19 caused courts all over the country to re-think their operations and design new protocols for legal

proceedings. Because there is no unified court system in Ohio, the table was set for a patchwork of dramatically different rules. CMBA leadership sought to mitigate unnecessary differences in court responses to COVID-19. Soon after Stay at Home orders were in place, the CMBA created a task force to establish best practices for court operations in both the short and long terms. Led by Brendan Sheehan, Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court Administrative Judge, and Joe Gross, President of the CMBA, the CMBA Bench-Bar COVID-19 Task Force includes representatives from every court in Cuyahoga County and has met two to four times a month since March 25th. Former CMBA President Ian Friedman was co-chair for the first few months, then passed the torch to Joe. Legal Aid applauds the CMBA for turning this bold vision into reality.

The task force's goal is to bring leaders of the bar (attorneys) and bench (judges) together to ensure courts to provide access the courts and keep people safe. As a part of this task force, Legal Aid ensures that every conversation about court accessibility and functionality during this time takes into consideration the constraints faced by people in poverty. There has been markedly less confusion and more consistency in court operations due to the CMBA's leadership.



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