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September 2019

# Mobile Home Park Advocacy Project Protects Rights of Mobile Homeowners

Mobile homes are the last form of unsubsidized affordable housing in South Florida. With affordable housing reaching a crisis level, the Legal Services Mobile Home Park Advocacy Project advocates forcefully to ensure and protect the rights of mobile home owners in Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties. The Project's highly effective advocacy has kept hundreds of families in their homes.

## Legal Services Gets Relocation Benefits for Mobile Homeowners in the Keys

In September 2018, all of the residents in three Flamingo Island\* Mobile Home Parks in Monroe County received notice that the parks were closing in six months because the land had been purchased and was going to be redeveloped to create affordable work-force housing. Many had recently put much of their savings into making renovations and

repairs to their homes which had suffered extensive damage after Hurricane Irma. Under Florida law, the mobile home owners, who own their home but rent the land underneath, would only be entitled to \$1,375 in relocation funds if

affected mobile homeowners. After extended negotiations with the park owner, **each mobile homeowner received a total value of up to \$20,000 each in relocation funds and an extra 6 months to relocate (one year total)**. In addition, they obtained the right to return to the affordable housing units once they are constructed. Through this effective advocacy, the mobile home park residents and their families avoided homelessness and will be able to move forward with their lives.

## Legal Services Helps Mobile Home Residents Organize for Empowerment

The 800 residents of Sunnyland and Trinidad Court Mobile Home Parks recently faced a rent increase of \$200-\$300 per month when the parks were sold to a group of investors. Most of the residents, who had made Sunnyland and Trinidad Court their home for decades, were not able to sustain the rent increase, particularly since it was foisted upon them on short notice. In addition, despite the proposed rent increase, poor park conditions including flooding, sewage overflows, and trash heaps, remained unaddressed. Calvo helped the residents form a Homeowners Association to fight the increases which violated Florida Statutes because the new owners did not give the tenants the required 90-day notice. The Association also sought to require the new owners to make the much needed repairs to the parks. The ability to

organize into an Association empowered the residents to continue to fight the increases and eviction notices through mediation and affirmative lawsuits in Circuit Court. To date, **Legal Services has successfully defended the residents of Sunnyland and Trinidad Court in 30 evictions, and is currently defending an additional 20 evictions**, as the tenants continue to pursue protecting their rights.

## Legal Services Obtains Largest Relocation Assistance Settlement To Date

In Homestead, owners of the Pine Isle Mobile Home Park sent an eviction notice to all 40 homeowners in a 55+ age community that is going to be redeveloped from a mobile home park to town homes. With assistance from Legal Services, the homeowners formed a Homeowners Association and filed a lawsuit challenging the evictions. The lawsuit was successfully resolved, with the Association obtaining a **settlement of \$20,000 plus 4 months free rent** for the multi section homeowners, and **\$12,250 plus 4 months free rent** for the single wide mobile homeowners. This is almost **ten times more than the statutory amount of relocation assistance** required by Florida law, and is the highest settlement amount per homeowner to date. The homeowners are now able to move on with dignity and avoid homelessness.

\*Park name changed



Nejlá Calvo, Esq.

forced to abandon their homes. Legal Services Attorney Nejlá Calvo represented 5 of the



From the  
Executive Director  
Monica Vignes-Pitan

While the pace in South Florida tends to “slow down” during the summer, this has not been the case for Legal Services. We have been busy responding to the rapidly growing needs of our client community, and have been able to do so thanks to the additional resources provided through your generosity.

As we approach the last quarter of the year, **we are very excited to have reached 84% of the Annual Goal for the Building a Community of Justice Campaign.** The dedicated members of our Campaign Committee, joined by you—our friends and donors, are working hard to make certain that we meet and exceed our goal by year end. Thank you all for your support!

Our successful client advocacy is greatly enhanced by the pro bono efforts of our private bar partners as reflected in our newest initiative—**The Pro Bono Partners for Equal Justice Campaign.** Launched by Former Supreme Court Justice Raoul Cantero, this Campaign recognizes the value that law firm leadership has in promoting pro bono service. When law firm partners represent pro bono clients, they lead through example and emphasize the importance of providing equal justice for all, creating a ripple effect throughout their firm. **To date, 43 law firm partners from 35 law firms have led the way by providing pro bono legal assistance to 327 clients.**

**When we all work together toward the common goal of equality, we build a fair, just and economically strong and stable community.** On behalf of our Board of Directors, Campaign Committee, clients, and staff, thank you for your support, dedication and commitment.

## Why Do I Help?

Legal Services Board Member D. Porpoise Evans, a partner at Perlman, Bajandas, Yevoli & Albright, enthusiastically embraced the *Partners for Equal Justice Challenge* and its mission. Porpoise, who has been an active Pro Bono volunteer and advocate throughout his legal career, shares his experiences.

**Providing pro bono legal representation for individuals who would otherwise go without access to justice strengthens both our profession and our community.** Since I began practicing law 17 years ago, Pro Bono has been a natural component of my practice, not something forced or imposed. I find Pro Bono work to be personally rewarding, and consider it as integral to lawyering as business development or CLE.

**Pro Bono is not only the right thing to do, it also offers great opportunities to develop legal skill sets and experience that can be hard to come by in business firm settings.** When I began my career in “Big Law”, Pro Bono work offered me the opportunity to do work close to my heart. Early on, I focused on representing children with disabilities to afford them access to appropriate educational services. My focus later shifted to immigrant asylum cases. These experiences helped me to grow as an attorney.

My current pro bono work compliments my specialty—labor and employment law. I assist nonprofits and minority owned businesses with labor and employment issues including dispute resolution, corporate governance, and drafting of handbooks, policies, and procedures. My work has helped stabilize multiple small and minority owned businesses and nonprofits in our local community. And as a Legal Services Board Member, I lead the Client Services Committee which creates pro bono opportunities for Board Members.

**I invite you to join me helping our community through pro bono.**



From Board Member  
D. Porpoise Evans





John Perloff, Esq.



Adam Dionisopoulos,  
UM Law student



Joseph A. DiRuzzo, III, Esq.



Daniel M. Lader, Esq.



Joanne Gelfand, Esq.

## Law School Pro Bono Challenge Helps Senior Citizen

When 84-year-old Jeannine Nightingale sought review of her last will and testament, she had no idea she would have the extraordinary benefit of the Florida Pro Bono Law School Challenge with mentorship and law school pride on her side. Through the Challenge, **University of Miami Alumnus John Perloff** and **Law Student Adam Dionisopoulos** were matched to handle her case. Together, they provided an extensive overhaul of her will and advance directives, affording her peace of mind.

*"The Challenge was a great way to take on a pro bono client,"* said busy boutique practitioner Perloff. *"I was able to choose a matter within my expertise, reconnect with my law school, and mentor a young and energetic law student."*

*"Pro bono is an incredible way to give back to the community,"* said Dionisopoulos. *"It was also a great opportunity to work with and learn from John Perloff."*

Pro Bono was a win for all involved!

## Senior Citizen Receives Innocent Spouse Relief from Tax Debt

Mary\*, a senior citizen living in a foreclosed home, faced IRS debt totaling \$187,000 and loss of her retirement benefits due to the gambling addiction of her 30 year spouse. Her pro se request for Innocent Spouse Relief was denied by the IRS.

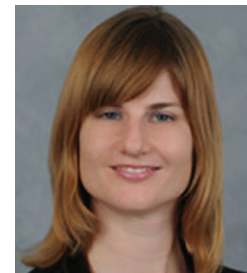
Through the Legal Services Low Income Tax Court Project, Mary received help from **pro bono attorneys Daniel M. Lader and Joseph A. DiRuzzo, III (DiRuzzo & Company)** who represented her in Tax Court. **Their extraordinary efforts and skill resulted in a reduction of the debt amount from \$187,000 to \$3,000, enabling Mary to consider retirement and provide for herself.**

Always humble and eager to help, Daniel and Joseph had this message to share: *"At DiRuzzo & Company, we recognize the importance of pro bono representation. We are grateful for the opportunity that Legal Services provides us to assist low income taxpayers protect their rights against the government."*

\*Client's name was changed to protect her identity.

## Attorney Helps Fight "Slumlord Millionaire" Sanctioned by Courts

**Ensuring that landlords honor their statutory and contractual obligations to provide safe housing is an essential element to a strong community.** To enforce those obligations, Legal Services Attorney Rebecca Schram filed a lawsuit on behalf of five Liberty City tenants living in conditions so egregious that a local news channel presented the



Rebecca P. Schram, Esq.

four part exposé "Slumlord Millionaire." Our clients' daily battle with mold, roaches, electrical issues, and spotty repairs was documented in City of Miami inspection reports

which declared the building unsafe. **The case wound its way through state, federal district, and bankruptcy courts for four years and settled for \$565,000, with each client receiving \$100,000.** *"Our success would not have been possible without pro bono assistance from Joanne Gelfand of Akerman,"* said Schram. *"Her bankruptcy expertise made all the difference. Plus, she's a fighter!"*

## PARTNERS FOR EQUAL JUSTICE CAMPAIGN RESULTS:

**50** law firm partners accepted challenge



**395** clients assisted



**41** law firms participated





# The Tenth Anniversary Heart of Giving



Over 350 people representing the legal, business and civic community gathered at the beautiful Paradise Plaza Event Space in the Miami Design District, **Thursday, May 9, 2019** at the **Tenth Anniversary HeART of Giving Celebration and Judicial Reception** hosted by Legal Services of Greater Miami (Legal Services). The **2019 Equal Justice Leadership Award** was presented to **Gilbert King, Pulitzer Prize winning author of Devil in the Grove**, and **Alex Akerman, Jr., Esq.** for their pursuit of justice for the falsely accused Groveland Boys who were recently pardoned after a 70 year miscarriage of justice. Legal Services also presented the **Equal Justice Leadership Awards** to the **extraordinary women and men** who have guided the Campaign for Justice as Co-Chairs for the last decade: **Raoul Cantero**,



# g Celebration and Judicial Reception



**Wifredo Ferrer, Jason Kellogg, Corali Lopez-Castro, Tracy Nichols, Robert Parks, Stephen Rosenthal, Lilly Ann Sanchez, Eugene Stearns, and Stanley Wakshlag.** These outstanding leaders are the foundation upon which Legal Services has built a community of equal justice.

Michael Putney, Channel 10's two-time Emmy Award winning Senior Political Television Reporter and Columnist, served as Emcee of the event. **Title sponsors were Akerman, Berger Singerman, and Ryder System,** as well as **Greenspoon Marder as the Exclusive Liquor Sponsor.**



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*Donor Levels Reflect Cumulative Giving for the Campaign Period from January 1, 2017 through December 31, 2019.*

*Pledges and Gifts as of 8/23/2019*



# Legal Services Presents *Opportunity Zones: The New Tomorrow*



**Our Community and Economic Development Unit is on the leading edge of economic development in Miami-Dade's low-income communities.** By providing legal services to non-profits, working with developers on affordable housing, and helping small businesses grow and prosper, our staff and pro bono attorneys are making a significant difference in our community.

**To promote pro bono work in this area, Legal Services presented Opportunity Zones: The New Tomorrow, generously hosted by Kaufman Rossin and sponsored by Iberia-Bank.** This CLE/CPE course brought together

more than 75 professionals from the legal, accounting, financial, and real estate industries for an in-depth look at the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017—a new and exciting investment tool established by Congress to encourage long-term investments in low-income and rural communities. This program has the potential to become the nation's largest economic development program by providing a tax incentive for investors to re-invest their unrealized capital gains into Opportunity Funds that are dedicated to investing in Opportunity Zones — specific low-income areas designated by the governors and approved by the federal government.

The panel discussion, moderated by Legal Services Attorney Anna-Bo Emmanuel, explored opportunities for non-profit and for-profit partnerships to make a positive impact in low income communities. Panelists (pictured above) included: **Jordan Chisolm, Esq., Cozen O'Conner; Joe Hernandez, Esq., Chair of the Weiss Serota Helfman Cole & Bierman Real Estate Practice; Robert D. Matt, CPA, Kaufman Rossin, a specialist in tax planning and compliance for real estate companies and their owners.**

## ENFORCING EDUCATION RIGHTS OF DISABLED CHILDREN

Absent legal advocacy, schools frequently are reluctant to provide the services a disabled child requires and is legally entitled to receive. Special education laws are highly technical, and parents of a disabled child are frequently unable to successfully maneuver through the complex administrative and legal bureaucracy. This is especially true in Miami-Dade which is the fourth largest school district in the country and enrolls more than 345,000 students, of which almost 80,000 are in an exceptional student education program.

**An education attorney is instrumental in obtaining an appropriate education placement for a disabled student, thereby helping to ensure positive, life-long outcomes. Legal Services' Education Advocacy Project has worked to meet this overwhelming need for more than 20 years. With the support of the Batchelor Foundation and The Florida Bar Foundation, the Project represents parents on behalf of their children with disabilities to ensure that they receive the**

**education services to which they are legally entitled, and which they need in order to reach their full potential and become self-sufficient and contributing members of our community to the best of their ability.**

John's\* case is an example of the significant benefits of our education advocacy. John, a fourth-grader, was diagnosed with Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and developmental delays. For reasons un-



Miriam Haskell, Esq.

known to his mother, John's weekly counseling sessions at the school were stopped, after which John became aggressive at school. Fearing that without the counseling John would continue to act out at school and his education would

suffer, John's mom came to Legal Services for assistance getting the school to continue to provide the services John needs to succeed. **Legal Services Attorney Miriam Haskell successfully represented John in a series of negotiations focused on strengthening educational services and restarting counseling. After John's counseling re-started, his teachers no longer reported behavior problems, and John is now back on track to successful school completion.**

\*Client's name changed to protect minor's identity.



In the past **24 months** Legal Services has provided legal assistance to **55 children** like John



# YOUNG PROFESSIONALS COUNCIL

## ENGAGEMENT + INVESTMENT = IMPACT

The Young Professionals Council is committed to building a community for Equal Justice by:



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