

and Justice for All

Volunteer Lawyers
for Justice
Taking Cases. Changing Lives.

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION

From the Executive Director



Dear VLJ Friends,

What a great year for VLJ! We were honored to be part of an exclusive screening of Just Mercy, to meet Bryan Stevenson and Michael B. Jordan, and to speak on a pre-movie panel about justice issues in Newark. We hosted our most successful Arts & Eats for Justice fundraiser ever. We assisted 1,460 clients (benefiting 3,340 people in their households) through the help of 540 volunteers, and their donated services were valued at over \$2.6 million. Our advocates were amazing both inside and out of the courtroom, including VLJ Managing Attorney, Jessica Kitson, who co-authored a national report offering best practices for prosecutors handling post-conviction cases involving trafficking survivors.

While it will be tough to top 2019, 2020 is already showing great promise. The VLJ Board of Trustees has spent the last year undertaking a vigorous strategic planning process, and in March we will finalize an ambitious plan that will keep VLJ on a growth trajectory, increasing the impact and scope of free legal services for clients in need. We welcomed back Stella Lyubarsky as a Staff Attorney and Karen Robinson, who has been an outstanding advocate at VLJ for 10 years, is now a Senior Staff Attorney. Also in 2020, VLJ is prioritizing increasing legal services for tenants facing eviction in Essex County, as having a lawyer dramatically changes the outcome for low-income tenants. We will be sure to keep you posted on our progress. If you are not already, please consider joining our team as a donor and/or a volunteer, and here's to an impactful 2020!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Colley Keenan".

VLJ Welcomes New Board Members

VLJ is thrilled to welcome the following trustees who have already been long-time contributors to VLJ and former chairs of VLJ's Generation Now Committee:



Kaitlyn Stone, Esq.
Associate
Drinker, Biddle & Reath



Kelly Lloyd Lankford, Esq.
Senior Managing Associate
Dentons

Volunteer of the Month: January 2020



VLJ is honored to announce Nathan Howe as its January 2020 Volunteer of the Month. Nathan is an associate with McCarter & English, LLP where he assists clients in energy regulatory and transactional matters, as well as complex environmental and commercial litigation. Nathan has volunteered with VLJ for three years, becoming one of VLJ's expungement clinic's most committed and frequent volunteers.

Nathan has dedicated a large portion of his life to public service. Prior to joining McCarter & English, he served as an assistant county prosecutor for Somerset County, NJ. Through VLJ's longstanding partnership with McCarter, Nathan found the opportunity to contribute his expertise on the criminal legal system with VLJ's reentry program, ReLeSe.

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Good News

VLJ Was An Impact100 Essex Finalist!

VLJ is proud to have been a 2019 finalist for the Impact100 Essex grant. Impact100 Essex is a philanthropic group of women who gives grants to help disadvantaged, impoverished, and underserved populations in Essex County. VLJ requested funding to significantly increase our Tenancy Program that provides vital legal help to tenants facing eviction in Essex County. You may not know that there are 40,000 eviction complaints filed in Essex County every year! While VLJ didn't win the large grant, we were thrilled that Impact100 Essex awarded us \$10,000 to further our tenancy work. Congratulations to the award winner, MEND (Meeting Essential Needs with Dignity), and the other finalists. We are so grateful to Impact100 Essex for its commitment to helping vulnerable people in Essex County and for considering VLJ for this year's grant!

VLJ Benefits from Cyntoia Brown-Long's Book-Signing Visit

In October, Newark coworking space 3rd Space sponsored a talk by author and trafficking survivor Cyntoia Brown-Long. Cyntoia spoke about her book, "Free Cyntoia," which tells the story of her traumatic childhood, the events leading up to her life sentencing as a minor, and her fight for Justice. VLJ was honored to receive all proceeds from the event. We are also proud to bring awareness to domestic trafficking and shed light on the complexities and flaws in our criminal Justice system.

***Just Mercy* Premieres in Newark: VLJ Participates in Panel Discussion**



On December 17th, VLJ's staff was thrilled to attend the Newark premiere of the inspirational movie *Just Mercy* and participate in a panel discussion prior to the screening. Based on the memoir *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, by Bryan Stevenson, the film chronicles public interest attorney Stevenson as he sets forth to exonerate the wrongfully convicted and poor who are sentenced to death in Alabama.

The film stars Michael B. Jordan as Stevenson. Jordan, who was born and raised in Newark, brought the private film screening to his hometown. Jordan was in attendance and the screening to introduce the film along with actors Rob Morgan and Tim Blake Nelson, along with Bryan Stevenson himself. The actors praised Stevenson for his 30 year commitment to social justice that led to his founding of Equal Justice Initiative.

VLJ's Executive Director, Cathy Keenan, was a featured panelist, where she discussed advocacy on behalf of the underserved in our own community. She highlighted some of VLJ's program and partnerships with groups like the South Ward Promise Neighborhood (which provides wraparound services to families with children in Newark's South Ward.) Joining Cathy on the panel was Newark Mayor, Ras Baraka, New Jersey Institute for Social Justice President and CEO, Ryan Haygood, and Prodigal Sons & Daughters Founder, Dennis Porter. The panel was moderated by Janet Dickerson of Human Impact Solutions and included discussion on what attendees could do immediately following the film. Cathy's encouraging message was to ACT NOW in any capacity, like pro bono attorneys, to assist those in need.

The movie tagline is, "Every generation has a hero – meet ours." You too can be a hero by supporting VLJ and our work. And be sure to watch the incredibly moving and powerful film *Just Mercy* in theaters now.

Arts & Eats for Justice 2019: A Roaring Success

Thank you to all the sponsors, donors and attendees who made VLJ's 2019 gala our most successful event to date! We were so proud to recognize honorees Eisai Inc. and the Giantomasi Family—Francis J. Giantomasi, Gemma Giantomasi Diaco, and Francis M. Giantomasi, at the event.

The event was attended by over 350 people and raised a record amount for VLJ. Special thanks to Paul J. Fishman, Partner at Arnold & Porter and former US Attorney for the District of NJ, who served as emcee. One of the most powerful moments in the evening came when two of VLJ's clients, Curtis and James, spoke about the free legal services they received at the Veterans Legal Wellness Clinic.



There was not a dry eye in the room as the brothers recalled their legal troubles and thanked VLJ and all the volunteers and supporters for helping them. With your support, we can continue to change the lives of clients like Curtis and James.

Have you considered your legacy?

Volunteer Lawyers for Justice has introduced a Planned Giving program for those interested in leaving a legacy gift to VLJ.

Please consider a gift of stock, life insurance, IRA rollover, or a bequest.

For more information, please call Jaclyn Kramer at 973-755-4120.