

Staff Spotlight: Al Piedra



Foreclosure Mediation Paralegal **Al Piedra** has spent the last seven years helping low-income people save their homes. Around the time of the 2007 mortgage crisis, Al saw several of his friends going through housing issues, and as a homeowner

himself, he wanted to help.

Al came to CVLS two and a half years ago, from the Legal Assistance Foundation. His case management work includes communicating with bank personnel, housing counselors and other case managers to help his clients navigate the loan modification process.

Oh, and did we mention that Al is fluent in Spanish? Al translates documents, interprets during client interviews and occasionally in Court,

in addition to working on mediation cases with Spanish-speaking clients.

His favorite part of the process is the enforcement - after putting in the work, Al enjoys seeing a bank agree to modify a client's loan, which leads to the client keeping his or her home, or as Al puts it, "back on track."

"These people are usually in a tough place," he says. "They just need a little empathy."

Empathy is something Al has learned throughout his education, from majoring in English and Spanish at Northeastern Illinois University to earning his Masters in Legal Studies from John Marshall Law School; and his career, from restaurant management to legal aid.

Al believes working at CVLS, with what he happily describes as a "tight-knit group," is important not only because of the clients but also because of the volunteer engagement.

Placing pro bono cases with volunteers, he says, gives attorneys the opportunity to help on cases they wouldn't normally get to take. "It's challenging," Al says, "but rewarding."

So Long, Ruth Ann - and Welcome, Mark!

Ruth Ann Schmitt, executive director of the Lawyers Trust Fund since the organization's creation, plans to retire June 30, 2015, according to Board President Jennifer Nijman. Please join us in congratulating Ruth Ann on an incredible career, and thanking her for all her contributions to the legal field!

Ruth Ann began her illustrious career at CVLS as a staff attorney with the clinic program and the Jail Project, which provided civil legal services to Cook County Jail inmates. When federal funding for the Jail Project ended, Ruth Ann stepped into the Executive Director role, inheriting a large caseload, a decimated budget and a single staff support person. Working hard, however, she managed to raise enough money to keep CVLS afloat, eventually hiring additional staff and expanding the organization's capacity. Within a few years, CVLS was a national model for pro bono legal services, and, at the behest of the ABA, she

took a leave of absence to help establish similar pro bono programs across the country.

Without Ruth Ann's leadership and guidance, CVLS would not be the organization it is today.

After Ruth Ann moved to LTF in 1983, she leveraged LTF's capacity to fund legal services organizations across the state by developing initiatives to improve its technology and accessibility. Under her leadership, the LTF helped to create a legal aid hotline—CARPLS—and Illinois Legal Aid Online. The Lawyers Trust Fund is now the largest Illinois-based source of funding for legal aid, distributing over \$135 million in total grants since 1984.

Luckily for CVLS and fellow Illinois legal aid programs, LTF's board of directors selected longtime LTF deputy director **Mark Marquardt** to succeed Ruth Ann, effective April 1, 2015. Ruth Ann will serve as executive director emeritus/transition adviser until June 30.

Volunteer Honor Roll: Barbara Burns



A volunteer of over 20 years, Barbara Burns has taken on an extraordinary number of CVLS cases. A former kindergarten teacher, she is perfectly suited to taking on family law cases with the GAL for Minors Program.

In addition to her work as a panel volunteer, Barbara has consistently helped staff the Visitation Church Legal Clinic near Englewood, a critical area of the city.

Playing so many different roles as a CVLS volunteer, Barbara handles an enormous range of cases, from custody disputes and divorces with the panel and GAL for Minors programs to the various legal issues that arise at a clinic including wills and estates, real estate and housing.

Lucero Cervantes



As the Executive Assistant to the Executive Director of Erie Neighborhood House, Lucero Cervantes assisted this year in coordinating CVLS' Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP Legal Clinic, which Erie House hosts.

A major reason for the clinic's recent successes on the administrative side, Lucero also takes on cases.

She facilitates an amazing number of cases throughout the year, primarily involving custody and visitation for Latino clients. Lucero's work with the Drinker Biddle clinic, in strengthening low-income families in her community through providing access to critical services, exemplifies the ideals of both CVLS and Erie House.

Legal Prep / PILI Legal Clinic is Taking Off!

Our Legal Prep / PILI Legal Clinic recently made the front page of the Chicago Daily Law Bulletin!

The Legal Prep Charter Academy, located in West Garfield Park since 2012, currently provides a legal-themed education for 251 students. At the beginning of this year, in conjunction with the Public Interest Law Initiative, we opened the **Legal Prep / PILI Legal Clinic** in order to bring high quality, totally free civil legal aid services to the residents in the community.

Staffed by a team of volunteer attorneys comprised of PILI alumni, the Legal Prep clinic has been seeing a variety of cases, from housing to bankruptcy to power of attorney.

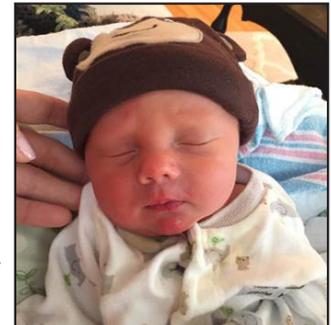
Law Bulletin reporter Roy Strom talked with PILI Executive Director Michael Bergmann and Legal Prep Development Director Rather Stanton about the growth of the clinic, including a plan for law firms to "adopt" the clinic for a month.

Welcome to the World!



Roenan Patt, longtime CVLS volunteer, is a new father! On March 9, Roenan and his wife, Sharee, became the proud parents of their first child, Ruben Alexander. Sharee and Ruben are both happy and healthy. Congratulations to the whole family!

Justice Entrepreneurs Project participant **Cindy Campbell** gave birth to her second son, Blake James Campbell, on March 26. Cindy, Blake and the family are happy and healthy.



Clinic Spotlight: Jane Addams Legal Clinic

CVLS' Jane Addams Legal Clinic's namesake founded Hull House in Chicago in 1889.

Over the years, it grew into a community organization that exemplified Addams' ideals for women's rights, neighborhood development and social justice.

In 1968, 79 years after Jane Addams opened Hull House, CVLS started a legal clinic at the Lakeview Jane Addams Hull House. Although CVLS moved the location of the clinic from the gentrified site to CVLS' Loop office in the late '90's, the clinic has always strived to uphold its founding ideals by providing free legal help to those who need it most.

Today, the clinic is a mainstay for volunteer attorneys who work in or near the Loop and can stop by after work. The average client is 44 years old and makes about \$16,000 per year. While the clinic sees a variety of legal issues, clients most often come in with Mental Health, Adoption and Landlord/Tenant cases.

CVLS' Jane Addams clinic is currently looking for new volunteers! The clinic meets every third Wednesday of the month at our offices, 33 N. Dearborn, from 5:30-6:30 p.m. If you're interested, contact Clinic Coordinator **Dan Santrella** at dsantrella@cvls.org.

Case in Point: Sandy & Brenda



In 2014, CVLS completed 75 adoption cases. This means that on an average of six times each month, one of our staff or volunteer attorneys finished a months-long process of navigating an often-difficult, sometimes complicated family or legal situation while advocating tirelessly for a low-income family.

One such case involved 29-year-old Brenda, a self-sufficient single woman who had

always wanted to be a mother. Through a family connection, Brenda found Alice, a pregnant teenager who could not support a baby in addition to her four-year-old daughter. Alice agreed to give her baby up, and from the day Noah was born, Brenda was his mother. She obtained guardianship, and when Noah was one year old, began the process of adopting him. Brenda visited our **Jane Addams Legal Clinic**, where longtime volunteer and Board member **Sandy Morris** agreed to represent her.

Despite Alice's initial compliance, Noah's birth mother proved difficult to track down, and even more difficult when it came time to sign her consent. Over a period of several months and many changes of heart, Sandy talked with Alice and convinced her why Brenda adopting Noah was in everyone's best interest.

The difficulties, however, didn't end there. At a home visit, a court investigator met Brenda's friend Robert who, despite acting as a positive presence in Noah's life, had been arrested multiple times on drug-related charges. Not to be deterred, Sandy convinced the county social worker that Robert's past should not influence Brenda's adoption of Noah, given that none of his charges affected his ability to treat a child well, and that he had been fully rehabilitated. The social worker was convinced, and recommended that the judgment for adoption be entered.

Adoption cases usually take four months; Brenda's lasted a year. So what keeps Sandy passionate and engaged with her pro bono work in the face of so many challenges? Because now, Brenda is thrilled to be the legal parent of her son - and Sandy made it happen.

"It makes me feel good," she says. "People who have less money are less able to advocate for themselves, and that manifests in a lot of different ways. One of the things we can do, because of our situation, is to level the playing field."

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Upcoming CVLS Events

Seminar | Perils of Voluntarily Dismissing Without Prejudice

12:15 PM

Tuesday, April 28

- Presented by Alan Borlack,
Bailey Borlack Nadelhoffer LLC

Mr. Borlack will address the reasons why you may want to voluntarily dismiss without prejudice, the risks every practitioner should know about and why you might want to think twice.

*CVLS is proud to partner with the **Illinois Disability Association (IDA)** in offering a series of CLE seminars on guardianships, particularly as they pertain to persons with disabilities.*

This series is part of a new collaboration between CVLS and the IDA to expand and enhance pro bono services to low-income persons with disabilities and their guardians.

IDA | Power of Attorney

120 S. LaSalle St. 7th Floor

12:15 PM

Wednesday, April 22

- Presented by Kerry Peck,
Illinois Disability Association

Powers of attorney began as a simple instrument within a client's estate plan. However, it has become an extremely powerful tool in late-in-life-estate planning, financial management during disability, and health care decision-making. We'll discuss how and when to use this tool.

*CVLS is proud to present a **GAL for Minors seminar series** in conjunction with the **Chicago School of Professional Psychology!** Masters and doctoral students from the Chicago School will present on a variety of mental health topics as they relate to Guardian ad Litem cases.*

GAL for Minors | Psychotropic Medication

CVLS Offices, 12:15 PM

Wednesday, April 22

- Presented by Sunshine Collins,
The Chicago School

Use of psychotropic medication for children and the role of the GAL.

GAL for Minors | Parent-Child Separation

CVLS Offices, 12:15 PM

Wednesday, May 13

- Presented by Whitney Zweifel,
The Chicago School

Impact of parent-child separation: poor parental functioning and its effect on guardianship cases

TRAININGS

New Volunteer Orientations

CVLS Offices, 12:15 PM

- Thursday, May 14

- Thursday, June 11

We'll cover the skills required to be a successful volunteer attorney, as well as the issues that may come up during cases. Training is for new volunteers working with CVLS.

Please visit www.cvls.org/cle to register for a seminar!

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