PRO BONO
IMPACT

LAUNCH OF THE INAUGURAL SMALL BUSINESS LEGAL ACADEMY

Photo by Rick Kopstein

Small business owners receive consultations from volunteer attorneys

In October, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest helped to organize the first-ever Small Business Legal Academy, held at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. The event was the brainchild of the Association of Pro Bono Counsel (APBCO), a professional organization that includes many of NYLPI's member firms. This free, all-day expo provided legal counseling to small business owners and nonprofits through New York City. Participants had the opportunity to attend workshops, receive one-on-one consultations with pro bono attorneys and financial services consultants and obtain follow-up services from a nonprofit legal service provider. NYLPI played a leading role in the day, organizing the press and serving as a provider of follow-up services for attendees. The event was a great success with more than 200 people attending and receiving free legal advice. Over 150 volunteer attorneys from 31 law firms staffed workshops and consultation tables, a demonstration of these firms' long-standing commitment to pro bono. Because of the resounding success of the clinic, APBCO is moving forward with plans to repeat the event regularly, and they have been asked to consult on replicating the event across the country. The firms that organized the event were **Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP**; **Kaye Scholer LLP**; **Proskauer Rose LLP**; **Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP**; **Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP**; and **Stroock & Stroock & Lavan LLP**. These firms are true leaders in their innovative approach and ability to leverage their resources to address the unmet need of so many small businesses.

Victory: Safer Schools

Christina Giorgio, NYLPI staff attorney, addresses the crowd at a press conference announcing the victory

After more than two years of litigation and grassroots organizing, NYLPI has won a dramatic reduction in the City's ten year timeline for removing toxic PCB light fixtures in NYC public schools. This hard-fought victory exemplifies what community lawyering can achieve through a vibrant campaign employing litigation, community organizing and policy advocacy. The triumph caps off the nine years-long battle of organizing against the presence of poly-chlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in public schools. PCBs were banned by Congress in 1977 due to their links to cancer, childhood leukemia, liver disease and much more. PCBs were used in building materials and electrical equipment and are commonly found in buildings constructed between 1950 and 1978, including many thousands of school buildings across the country. While the PCB-Free Schools campaign initially focused on PCBs in building materials, Department of Education (DOE) testing undertaken as a result of a suit brought by NYLPI found PCB air contamination from light fixtures actively leaking the toxic compound into the classrooms. Through spot inspections, the EPA found leaking PCB lights at 100% of schools inspected, and yet the City responded with a slow ten year timeline to remove the light fixtures. NYLPI partnered with New York Communities for Change and brought a second lawsuit to force a shorter timeline. In a strongly worded decision, US District Court Judge Sterling Johnson, Jr. criticized the City for its "insouciant foot-dragging" and characterized its legal positions as "disingenuous," "deceptive" and "absurd." Prompted by the judge's decision, we entered into successful settlement discussions in which we convinced the City to agree to our demand that they cut the timeline in half. The settlement is an extraordinary victory for parents, students, school staff and the entire school community, and one that could not have been achieved without NYLPI board member Richard A. Horsch and his team at **White & Case LLP**, whose tireless efforts strengthened our case immeasurably.

> "Parents like me will rest easier with the knowledge that at long last the city has made the removal of PCB lights from our kid's schools a priority."
>
> **—Celia Green, Parent and NYCC member**

Leap Conference Brings Public Service Leaders Together

NYLPI Health Justice Director Shena Elrington (right) speaks on a panel

Leap is a consortium of legal service providers that works to increase the availability of quality legal services for low-income people in New York City. Its membership includes community-based legal service providers and city-wide public interest advocacy groups who collaborate to provide assistance to over 60,000 households every year through innovative legal services delivery models. As a founding member, NYLPI helped to coordinate a conference to bring together city and state legislators, lawyers, advocates and community organizers to discuss the fight to strengthen low-income communities. NYLPI staff members presented on various topics including effective organizing, health care reform in New York, representing clients with diminished capacity, and the legal response to Hurricane Sandy. Over 200 people attended the conference, which was graciously hosted by **Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP**.

NYLPI Monitors the Health Marketplace

The rollout of the New York State Health Plan Marketplace under the Affordable Care Act was intended to improve access to health care, but limited English proficient people in New York are being left out. Although 36% of New Yorkers speak a language other than English, the Marketplace website and application are only available in English and only a limited number of fact sheets have been translated. There is little to no information about the free or low-cost healthcare options available to New Yorkers regardless of immigration status, and in-person assisters report difficulties verifying clients' immigration status through the Marketplace website. In response, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest has partnered with New York Immigrant Coalition (NYIC) to monitor these problems and others. We are taking a multi-pronged approach, conducting "secret shopper" calls to test the helplines, surveying the assistors and counselors who help consumers, and convening focus groups with immigrant consumers to document their experiences with the Marketplace. This monitoring project will enable us to make concrete recommendations on how to maximize the benefits of the Marketplace for all New Yorkers, regardless of immigration status or language spoken. New York has been a leader in language access and immigrant access to healthcare, passing several laws requiring state agencies and health care providers to provide interpretation and translation services to those who need them. We are hopeful that the state will continue its commitment to our immigrant communities and enable the Health Plan Marketplace to truly do what it's intended to do: increase access to health care for all New Yorkers.

Partnership Project Serves Seniors on Medicare

Seniors with Medicare must select a private insurance plan to receive drug coverage, and the task can often be difficult. Navigating the online system with its overwhelming amount of information can be daunting, particularly for seniors who are not computer proficient. Lenox Hill Neighborhood House helps seniors go through this process each year during the 8-week enrollment period. Their clients often include immigrants, disabled adults and newly retired Medicare beneficiaries. New York Lawyers for the Public Interest helped design a new project with Lenox Hill, pulling in a team from **Kasowitz, Benson, Torres & Friedman LLP**, led by Teresa Matushaj, to staff twice-weekly clinics. Lenox Hill trained and supervised the volunteer attorneys who were able to help 33 clients select the most affordable and appropriate prescription drug plans.

Members of the Kasowitz team with Mia Kandel of Lenox Hill Neighborhood House

We were so pleased to have partnered with NYLPI and Lenox Hill on the Medicare Part D Project. This partnership was a unique and rewarding experience for our attorneys. We look forward to continuing our partnership with NYLPI and Lenox Hill in the future.

— David J. Abrams, **Kasowitz, Benson, Torres & Friedman LLP**, Pro Bono Coordinator

Highlights from Pro Bono Matters

MASA-MexEd works to promote educational attainment, committed leadership and civic engagement among underserved students in New York City, with a particular focus on those of Mexican descent. **Seyfarth Shaw LLP** is assisting them with several employment and governance issues.

Liga Proayuda a Pacientes Mentales has been dedicated to serving the elderly, homeless, and people with mental disabilities in the San Juan and Bayamon areas of Puerto Rico. **Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler LLP** is helping the organization obtain tax-exempt status.

A group of Staten Island community members is working to preserve Mount Manresa, a Jesuit retreat house that has acted as a refuge for the community. **Nixon Peabody LLP** is providing counsel to the organization to preserve the facility.

Little L.A.M.B. Preschool has been serving a predominately Hispanic population of children with disabilities in Staten Island for 18 years. ***Morrison & Foerster LLP*** *is counseling them on a vendor dispute.*

The Michael Rothenberg Scholarship Foundation awards scholarships to students from low-income areas of the New York metro area demonstrating financial need and sound citizenship. **Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP** is assisting the foundation with incorporating and becoming tax-exempt.

Brooklyn Perinatal Network works to prevent and reduce infant and maternal illness and death by enabling at-risk residents to access vital information and supportive services and coordinate care. **Debevoise & Plimpton LLP** is assisting them with a partnership agreement.

Model Partnerships

Bklyn Public Library

In 2013, the Brooklyn Public Library and the New York Public Library launched a shared technical services initiative called BookOps, to manage the selection, acquisition, cataloging, processing and distribution of library materials at all the public library branches in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan and Staten Island. As a single purchasing group, BookOps is now the largest public library purchasing block in the country, with huge benefits to both systems. NYLPI connected Brooklyn Public Library to Robert Treuhold and Tania Mattei of **Shearman & Sterling LLP** to advise them on the new legal structure for this initiative. The joint operation was awarded the Urban Libraries Council's Top Innovator award for library operations for 2013. This strategic collaboration represents a monumental accomplishment that will benefit the millions of users of public libraries.

"Bob and Tania's help was invaluable to us, and we truly appreciate their hard work in bringing this new partnership to life."

— **Chloe Wasserman**, General Counsel, Brooklyn Public Library

A very special thank you to the following attorneys who have volunteered their time and efforts through the NYLPI Pro Bono Clearinghouse in the last six months. We appreciate your hard work on behalf of nonprofits.

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Honoring Innovative Leaders Steven Choi and Jonathan Westin at Annual Felix A. Fishman Awards Luncheon

NYLPI Executive Director McGregor Smyth, Fishman Honorees Steven Choi and Jonathan Westin, and NYLPI Chair-Elect Lawrence T. Gresser

On November 21, 2013 NYLPI presented Steven Choi and Jonathan Westin with the 2013 Felix A. Fishman Awards for their outstanding dedication and advocacy on behalf of the public interest.

Steven Choi is the executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition, a coalition of nearly 200 member groups that represents New York State's immigrant communities. Mr. Choi has worked at a wide array of legal organizations and engaged in community outreach. "Steve is a passionate, groundbreaking, and strategic leader who tirelessly advocates for better futures for marginalized New Yorkers," says Wayne Ho, Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies. "In his current position as the executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition, Steve is the right person to be the leading voice promoting the rights of immigrant communities in the city, state, and beyond."

Jonathan Westin is the executive director of New York Communities for Change (NYCC), a coalition of working families in low and moderate income communities fighting for social and economic justice throughout New York State. He began his organizing career working with homeowners in Southeast Queens at the height of the foreclosure crisis. Hector Figueroa of SEIU Local 32BJ highlights Mr. Westin's dedication to improving the lives of New York's underserved communities: "Jonathan Westin has demonstrated tremendous leadership and commitment as the leader of New York Communities for Change. Our members and staff have worked with him on issues that are close to the hearts of working families."

The annual Fishman Awards Luncheon is held in honor of Felix A. Fishman, who shared NYLPI's dedication to using the law in service of others.

Thanking Members of the Cyrus Vance Circle

NYLPI's Cyrus Vance Circle Appreciation Event was held at the offices of **Cohen & Gresser LLP** on October 23. Host and NYLPI Chair-Elect Lawrence T. Gresser and members of NYLPI's Cyrus Vance Circle gathered for a wine and food pairing event led by one of New York City's top sommeliers. The Cyrus Vance Circle is named after NYLPI's founding board chair Cyrus Vance and recognizes our core group of major supporters. The commitment and energy of Mr. Vance and NYLPI's other founding members transformed a compelling idea into an enduring reality – one which has dramatically increased access to legal assistance for low income New Yorkers and made a difference in the lives of thousands of people. The generous donations of current Cyrus Vance Circle members allow NYLPI to continue its work to advance equality and civil rights throughout the city.

NYLPI Chair-Elect Lawrence T. Gresser of **Cohen & Gresser LLP**, immediate past chair Shelley J. Dropkin of **Citigroup, Inc.** and current Chair Hector Gonzalez of **Dechert LLP**

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If you work for a nonprofit or community-based group working with underserved people and your organization needs legal assistance, please contact Heidi Kim at 212-244-4664.

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Editor: Heidi Kim
Contributors:
Isabelle Foley, Anne Koester

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