

CLS-EPA In the News

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benefiting others

Gentry's Emily Assad discovers a community determined to provide free legal services. Dreaming is the easy part. Anyone can effortlessly concoct an idea of what they want for the world. But what about the ones who act on their dreams? What do you call them? They are not quite dreamers nor are they realists, but they can make a substantially bigger impact on the lives of others.

The community of East Palo Alto falls into this nameless bracket. They had something to accomplish and never let the "what ifs" cloud their path. In the end, their accomplishment was the formation of the Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto, CLS-EPA, an organization providing free legal services for low-income, under-served families.



When news traveled around the community that the free legal services division of the East Palo Alto Community Law Project was closing, many realized they would be losing a very valuable resource. It was then that the community formed a transition committee made up of community members, lawyers, and staff formerly involved in the Law Project.

But creating this community organization was not a simple task. Elizabeth Jackson, a member of the transition committee, recalls that it "had no money at all, just dreams and desire." They began writing donation requests to businesses in the area and contacted lawyers on how to raise funds. By the time the East Palo Alto Community Law Project closed its doors for the first time, CLS-EPA was opening theirs for the first.

Since the formation of CLS-EPA, it has been providing clients with free legal services pertaining to eviction, discrimination, predatory lending, immigration law, and more. The staff's work is complemented by volunteer pro bono attorneys who lend both their legal expertise and spare time to help out the community in any way possible.



Above: Stanford University law school students Nat Garrett and Tyler Doyle discuss a case from the volunteer attorney program

Left: Stanford University undergraduates Crystal Lopez (standing) and Elda Acosta work as part of a work-study program

Executive Director Geraldine Steinberg was a retired lawyer who joined CLS-EPA to make a difference in the community. But after working with an array of clients and volunteers, Steinberg feels the community has made a difference on her. "I have worked in many organizations," she explains, "but I've never had this feeling of satisfaction in doing something so worthwhile."

Trained, supervised Stanford Law School students lend their services by interviewing and counseling clients, relaying advice to clients in the immigration and housing programs, and providing many other services at the Volunteer Attorney Program.

CLS-EPA has transformed from a community idea to a community success in a small amount of time. Their workload is constantly increasing and a few extra hands are always needed. Contrary to popular belief, volunteers do not have to be attorneys. Steinberg reiterates that whether it's answering phones and setting up appointments, or lawyers offering pro bono service, "there is room for anyone who wants to work."

When looking at the start and finish to a dream, it is sometimes difficult to see the middle. So much was accomplished during the middle stages in order to realize the dream. After speaking with only a few people among this large, compassionate group, it is easy to define those who lie somewhere in between the dreamers and realists; they are called heroes. ■

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