

# Fifteen-Year Anniversary for Equal Justice America

By Joel Katz

In 1990, when Dan Ruben was a second year student at Pace University Law School he spotted a small item in the New York Times about a student-run program at NYU Law School. Students were raising money to help their fellow students work during the summer in public interest law. There was no such organization at Pace so Ruben started one, the Public Interest Law Scholarship Organization (PILSO), which continues to thrive at Pace today.

When Ruben began approaching professors for contributions to PILSO, he was pleased and surprised that nearly every single one wrote a check. He realized that the PILSO idea could be built into a national organization, that the issue driving it — the lack of adequate legal representation for so many Americans — was so compelling that such an organization could be successful on a national scale.

What began in 1993 as an organization that sponsored just five law student fellowships in its first year, Equal Justice America (EJA) has awarded more than \$5.25 million in grants and has provided approximately 550,000 hours of free legal services to the poor. In the past year EJA sponsored more than 225 Law Student Fellowships. EJA has grown its annual budget to nearly \$1.2 million by successfully raising mostly modest contributions from attorneys across the country. Students at more than 50 law schools now have the opportunity to participate in Equal Justice America's Fellowship Program.

By putting law students to work under the supervision of experienced attorneys at legal services programs, a growing army of future lawyers receives the training and skills necessary to carry on the crucial work of meeting the legal needs of the poor. More than 1,800 law students have received Equal Justice America fellowships. Many have graduated from law school to continue the work they began in school as EJA Fellows, advocating on behalf of those most in need. In 2008 EJA will celebrate its 15th year of working to protect the rights of children and families in poverty.

"We continue to work hard to make a real difference in people's lives," Ruben said. "Families threatened with eviction and homelessness; women assaulted by violent and abusive husbands and boyfriends; the elderly ripped off by unscrupulous business practices; and the disabled fighting to have needed benefits restored. These are the people we go to bat for every day by supporting legal services programs and legal aid societies throughout the country."

## Legal Aid Programs Across Nation Celebrate EJA's Success

*Christine Todd, vice president of administration at the Legal Aid Society of San Francisco* — "Equal Justice



Photo by Angel Morton Photography

**EJA Executive Director Dan Ruben with EJA Fundraiser Jeff Ridgeway.**

America has quietly and effectively provided important support to the practice of public interest law by funding law students whose talent, commitment and enthusiasm contribute immensely to this work. Equal Justice America's leadership is an invaluable help in ensuring that the next generation of idealistic young lawyers will be able to continue the tradition of public service."

*Martin Needelman, project director at Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation* — "Our ability to avoid the most draconian reductions in services can be largely attributable to the contribution made by a corps of highly motivated and dedicated law student interns. The overwhelming majority of these wonderful and indispensable young law students has been financed by EJA. We need EJA more than ever before and the need is nothing less than urgent."

*Robert Sable, executive director of Greater Boston Legal Services (GBLS)* — "Over the past several years Equal Justice America has provided funding for more student interns at GBLS than any other organization. EJA Fellowship recipients have been a tremendous help to our staff in providing legal assistance to the most vulnerable members of the Boston community."

*Catherine Carr, executive director of Community Legal Services in Philadelphia* — "Through the years EJA has provided tens of thousands of dollars in support of our summer and school year internship programs. Without EJA, our law student internship program would be far smaller. One of the wonderful things about legal services work is the presence of young idealistic spirited, highly skilled law students. By making it possible for students to work with us, EJA has helped keep our advocacy fresh and impassioned."

*Gerald Nordgren, director of legal services at the Chicago Legal Clinic* — "Some of the best and brightest of

**See EJA on page 26**

## EJA - Continued from page 4

the nation's law students have been able to receive substantial funding for fellowships to work as interns in our offices. Some of these students have impressed us so much that they later have become staff attorneys in our organization. Other students have gone on to make substantial contributions to the public interest field through other organizations. We are really grateful for our relationship with Equal Justice America."

Through the years, Equal Justice America has strived to expand its program and its influence. In 1997, EJA began funding the Yale Law student-run Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) Project at the New Haven Legal Assistance Association (NHLAA). The TRO Project assists domestic violence victims attempting to file orders of protection on their own.

For years the TRO operated strictly with student volunteers.

"The funding from Equal Justice America that now pays the student directors has enabled it to become a much more established and professionally run project," said Patricia Kaplan, executive director of NHLAA. "The TRO is one of the most successful student projects to come out of the law school and is a demonstration project for law schools and legal services programs throughout the country."

In September 2000, Pace Law School established the Equal Justice America Disability Rights Clinic with a major grant and an ongoing commitment from EJA. The EJA Clinic has delivered much needed civil legal services to indigent disabled children and adults, while educating law students who are committed to becoming effective advocates for those in need. Nearly 60 Pace law students have taken part in the EJA Clinic and Equal Justice America has renewed its support of the clinic through

August 2009. The EJA Clinic has become an integral part of the law school's highly regarded clinical program.

In 2002, EJA began awarding post-graduate fellowships to launch the public interest careers of outstanding young attorneys. More than \$800,000 has been committed to these two-year post-graduate EJA Fellowships, allowing legal services organizations to receive new full-time staff to better meet a community's needs. In cooperation with Harvard University, EJA has awarded post-graduate fellowships that began this fall at the New York Legal Assistance Group and New Hampshire Legal Assistance (NHLA). John Tobin, executive director at NHLA wrote that "the fellowship will make an enormous difference in our program's ability to serve vulnerable and troubled children."

In 2006, Equal Justice America hired Joel Katz, a former executive in the performing arts center industry, to expand EJA's fundraising strategies. Katz took the job of director of development and among many other projects, he created Virginians for Equal Justice which funded 16 Virginia law students at seven legal service organizations this past summer. This simple idea, placing Virginia law students at Virginia legal service organizations funded by Virginia attorneys, exceeded expectations for its first year.

A major grant from the Cameron Foundation has recently been awarded to EJA to place a recent law school graduate in a full-time job at the Legal Aid Justice Center in Petersburg, VA. The grant represents EJA's largest contribution in its 15-year history.

For more information, visit EJA's comprehensive website: [www.equaljusticeamerica.org](http://www.equaljusticeamerica.org) ★

*Joel Katz is director of development at Equal Justice America.*

## Who do YOU think is leading the charge for equal justice? 2008 Kutak-Dodds Prizes Nominate TODAY!

NLADA is seeking nominations for the 2008 Kutak-Dodds Prizes. The prestigious award will honor two legal advocates for equal justice, one from the public defense community and another from the civil legal aid community, who, through the practice of law, are contributing in a significant way to the enhancement of human dignity and quality of life of those persons unable to afford legal representation.

**EACH PRIZE CARRIES A CASH AWARD OF \$10,000!**

The nominations deadline is Friday, April 11, 2008. For nomination criteria, please visit [www.nlada.org/About/About\\_Awards\\_Kutak](http://www.nlada.org/About/About_Awards_Kutak)

**For further information: Contact the Development Department at (202) 452-0620 ext. 223 or [development@nlada.org](mailto:development@nlada.org)**