

Civil Justice: A Model for the Community

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In association with the School of Law, Civil Justice Inc. (CJ) enables recent graduates to gain experience while serving the community. A growing network of more than two dozen attorneys, CJ provides high-quality low-cost representation for low- to moderate-income clients. CJ was established in September 1998 through a grant from the Open Society Institute of the Soros Foundation, a group that funds programs worldwide and works for legal reform.

Currently, attorneys in the program are working toward providing low-cost settlement representation to first-time home buyers. CJ assembles a panel of lawyers to represent clients so they wouldn't be subjected to fraudulent practices. "This happens quite often," according to Denis Murphy, CJ's executive director and a board member, "because most first-time home buyers don't consult with a lawyer before settlement due to the extra expense."

In addition to helping clients, CJ "is a great resource for new and solo practitioners," Murphy explains. Through the network, recent graduates are able to bounce questions and suggestions off each other, which proves to be helpful when they are just starting out.

Nevett Steele Jr. '67, board member and acting chairperson of CJ, agrees. "Having this network also takes the loneliness and fright out of being a solo practitioner."

Each CJ attorney has an Internet connection and may log on daily for online discussions. This cooperative group effort has helped make the program a success.

Ann M. Lembo '95, who began her own practice two years ago and considers herself a "community attorney," hopes the networking system will continue to grow. "As we build our practices and become more experienced, we should need less support from Civil Justice. Then our roles will change, and we will become the mentors. The network will be an incubator for new attorneys who want to do well while doing good for the community."

Denis Murphy says that while current funding is generous, the program operates on a grant requiring annual renewal. And because there are no guarantees for future

financial support, it is difficult to take on a wider variety of cases or to expand in other ways. Consequently, its member attorneys are exploring additional funding options.

Ideas for growing the program include a fellowship program in which School of Law graduates would work out of the Civil Justice office for one or two years to gain experience in a community-based program where they "will learn proper techniques and be better able to adjust when they join a firm or start private practice," says Murphy.

Board member Suzanne K. Farace '87 would like to see the program "expand to accept cases that would be fee-generating not only to the network members, but to the program as a way to partially offset the cost."

Steele would like the program to open another office north of the city. "The Baltimore County Bar would be a fertile place for Civil Justice to get established due to a lot of solo practitioners there as well as a good potential clientele base. Baltimore County

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would also be a good 'test ground' to determine whether the program works," adds Steele.

If you are interested in more information on CJ, visit the Web site at www.law.umaryland.edu/civiljustice.

Working at Civil Justice are (from left) Peter Holland '92, Rebecca Tabb '87, Anthony Omwuanibe '97, Khalilah Nugent '99 and Denis Murphy.

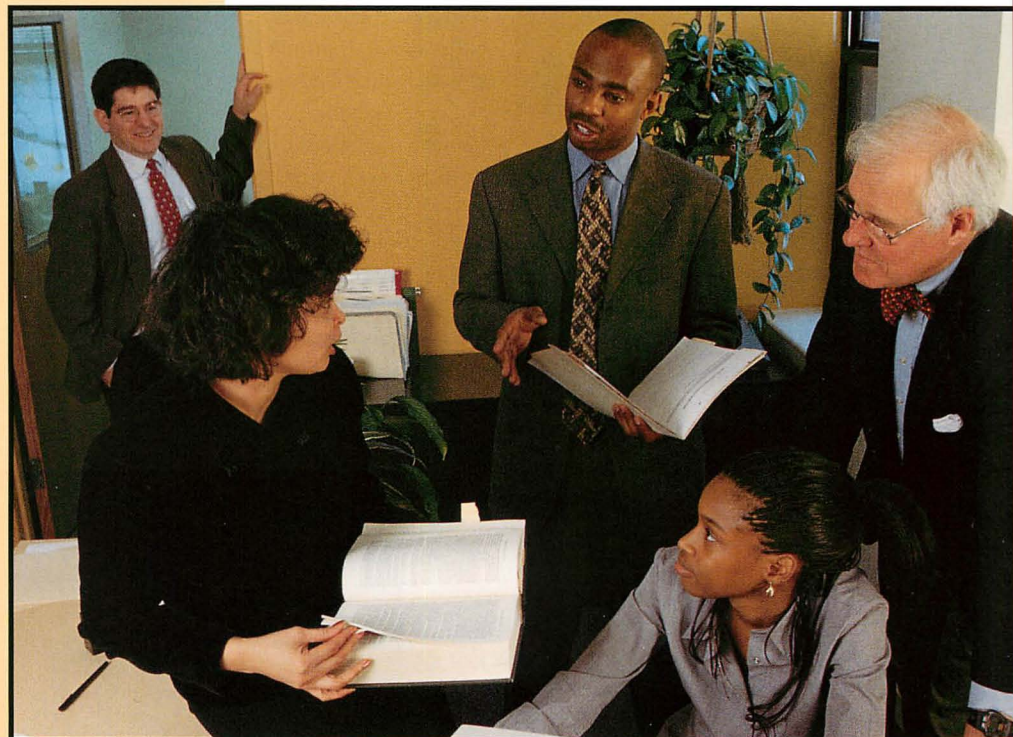


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