

# GULFCOAST NEWS

SERVING PINELLAS, PASCO, HILLSBOROUGH, MANATEE, AND SARASOTA COUNTIES

GULFCOAST LEGAL SERVICES, INC .

SPRING 2011



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## Director's Corner

John P. Cunningham, Esq.  
Executive Director

At a time when legal aid offices are triaging calls for assistance, this year's class of law graduates is having the most difficult time in decades finding employment. Were it not for cutbacks in federal, state, local and IOTA funding, many of these graduates could bring their training, enthusiasm and creativity to a legal services program. The economy is certainly a negative contributing factor to the downsizing of legal services to the poor, but until our nation is willing to act on the long established principles of equal justice for all, many will continue to be denied legal counseling and representation. There is, however, some good news in the growth of pro bono volunteerism by attorneys (last year nearly 8,300 hours were donated by attorneys working with GLS clients) and by law students. Fortunately, the future is hopeful, as this is America, and we are not about to forget for long the promise of liberty and justice for all.

## GLS Director Celebrates 30 Years!



The Board of Directors held a surprise luncheon for Executive Director John Cunningham to recognize his 30 years at GLS. John came to Gulfcoast in 1981 from The Legal Aid Society in New York City where he was the supervising attorney of the Civil Division. There he directed and trained staff and law students in the area of public assistance. He began his GLS career as Managing Attorney of the Clearwater office of this fledgling legal aid organization which had opened its doors in late 1979. Since January 1984 when he became the Executive Director, he has guided GLS through many changes, from secretaries with carbon paper and monthly updates to the library, to each advocate having their personal computer for legal research and case management, adding programs and staff, changing from a Legal Services Corporation funded program to an unrestricted program that is able to handle immigration cases and class action suits. GLS is recognized for its groundbreaking legal work in immigration and housing, its popular intern training program in conjunction with Stetson University College of Law, top quality representation of its clients and innovative programs that answer emerging needs of the low income populations throughout the GLS service community. He has built strong collaborative ties with the area's human service agencies, law enforcement and the legal community.



## New Board Officers



The Board of Directors recently elected new officers for the year 2011-2012. They are Nawal B. McDaniel, Esq. of Fisher and Sauls President; Susanna Johnston-Versandi, J.D., of Ameriprise Financial Services, Vice President; Alena Miles, C.P.A, Treasurer; and Pamela D. Cichon, Esq. of the City of St. Petersburg, Secretary. Three new members also joined the board. They are Lynn Hanshaw, Esq., Donna Blazevec, Esq. and Alena Miles, C.P.A.

From L to R, Pamela D. Cichon, Alena Miles, Nawal B. McDaniel, and Susanna Johnston-Versandi

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## GLS-CHILD Helps Leo Fulfill His Dreams

In his darkest moments Leonardo David Leal-Guerrero, 18, had every reason to give up and just take the expected easy road out of his problems. But there were dreams and hopes for a better future that his grandmother had instilled in him as a little boy in Rio de San Juan, Mexico, a small town about 2 hours north of Mexico City.

Leo's grandmother raised him in a loving home until heart disease made it too difficult to care for him. He was sent to join his mother, step-father and extended family in the United States. It would be a difficult life from that moment. Six years ago 12 year old Leo entered seventh grade and quickly picked up English well enough leave ESL behind by 8th grade. He excelled in school even though his home life was uncertain, always moving between relatives because of an abusive step-father. At 16, during a time when he had no other options but to live with his mother and step-father, he was told to quit school or leave. He was on his own again but never wavered in his desire for education.



Today Leo is realizing at least part of his dream. With the help of Adriana Dinis, the GLS-CHILD attorney, Leo now has permanent resident status. Throughout the long legal process, Adriana became his friend and cheerleader. He graduated from Braden River High School with a 4.66 GPA and received an associate's degree from State College of Florida. He had a long acceptance list of universities eager to meet his academic ambitions including Brown, Harvard and Stanford, all offering full scholarships. Leo has chosen Stanford for its warm, welcoming atmosphere added to superior academic programs. "It just feels right and will be good to spend four years there." He has three very diverse areas of interest: medicine, especially neurology and cardiology; international business; and languages. He taught himself Italian by watching it on BBC and has even picked up a little French.

Many people helped him achieve his goals. Project Heart, a program that assists families and students who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, referred Leo to Gulfcoast Legal Services. Teachers at the high schools recognized his intelligence and his strong work ethic, always turning around roadblocks into positive outcomes. Deborah Bailey, project manager for Project Heart says, "It was clear he was brilliant because he's only been in the country a few years. He's bounced around from relative to relative over the past couple of years. It just impresses me that he's persevered. It would have been much easier to just give up."

Leo says it was his grandmother who encouraged him to dream, get a good education, and stick to his values. He continued to dream even though others wanted him to quit school and get a job. He hasn't seen his grandmother, Magdalena, since he came to the States but talks to her often and is looking forward to his extended stay this summer. It's a way of thanking her for all she has done for him. His heroes are his teachers, caring guidance counselors, GLS - especially Adriana his GLS-CHILD attorney who helped him through the SIJS process along with his permanent residence status as well as helping him with college applications, essays and interview skills. "Leo is truly an exceptional young man" says Adriana, "It's been a joy to work with him." Next stop, Stanford. Classes begin in September.



## Region 4 Legal Aid Agencies Share Training



Gulfcoast Legal Services, Bay Area Legal Services, Community Law Program and Legal Aid of Manasota, which forms Region 4 among Florida's legal aid organizations, collaborated on a staff training day recently at Boyd Hill Nature Center. Participants learned about techniques to reduce stress, working in groups and relaxation. Region 4 sponsors many substantive trainings throughout the year.

## Norton Apartments Given New Life

The Norton Apartments had a lot going for the 48 families living there, residents who look out for one another, a location next to a community center, a water park and sports fields, a multi-generational community and front porches to watch children play while catching up with neighbors.

What it also had was a landlord full of empty promises of upkeep, repairs and ADA compliant modifications. There was termite damage, backed up sewage, buckling floors, and barely functioning appliances. More troubling, the landlord took the property into Chapter 11 bankruptcy in the spring of 2010, giving Norton an uncertain future. Norton is one of a few project based Section 8 multifamily communities remaining in Pinellas County and it was in imminent danger of losing its HUD Housing Assistance Payments (HAP) contract. Since the landlord hadn't done required repairs or upkeep in years, HUD gave it failing scores on condition and property management and began the process of abating the HAP contract. Residents had been approved by HUD for relocation assistance.

GLS affordable housing project attorney Christine Allamanno and her counterpart Dorothea Lee of Bay Area Legal Services learned about the property in summer of 2010. Attendance at a Housing Preservation Seminar led Allamanno and Lee to review the list of Project Based Section 8 rental communities in Pinellas County, which in turn led to discovery of the imminent shuttering of Norton.

The attorneys visited the apartments to assess the problems and meet its residents. Private Real Estate Developers, nonprofits, Pinellas County government, the City of Clearwater, Carlton Fields who worked with Allamanno and Lee to represent the Norton residents pro bono in the bankruptcy and the Pinellas County Housing Authority came together to help the residents and rescue their homes. Due to the community effort the Pinellas County Housing Authority purchased Norton out of Chapter 11 with funds from the federal Neighborhood

Stabilization program and placed the property in the Pinellas Community Land Trust, assuring that the housing remains affordable for successive generations. Pinellas County also provided a \$390,000 grant from the Department of Energy to provide Energy Star appliances and energy efficient windows for the 48 units. John Lamoureux, a principal at Carlton Fields offered pro bono services as he expertly guided the team through the bankruptcy proceedings and worked with the bank to pay off the mortgage with the NSP II funding. With the Pinellas County Housing Authority now the owner of the property, HUD was happy to renew the contract with one of their highest-ranked housing authorities.

"This was a real life example of 'it takes a village'", Chris Allamanno said. If any of the pieces had fallen out of the picture, the NSP money provided by Pinellas County and Clearwater, the Housing Authority's willingness to step up, the connections we made at last summer's seminar, which enabled us to reach the proper parties at HUD, the expert bankruptcy assistance in negotiating with the bank and the owner that we received from Carlton Fields, the grant from The Florida Bar Foundation which enabled Dorothea Lee and me to do this work, and most importantly, the patience and perseverance of the residents in fighting for their community, those buildings would be vacant and crumbling right now instead of becoming a hub for revitalization and community services for the neighborhood."



*Christine Allamanno,  
Affordable Housing Attorney*

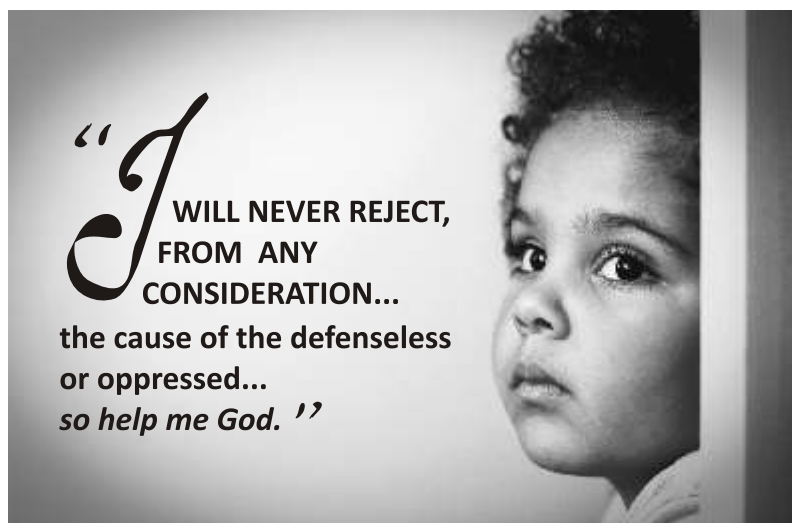
## REMEMBER GLS...

Now more than ever, we need your help.

The number of eligible clients has mushroomed during this difficult economy. Clients who never even considered they would ever be eligible for legal assistance suddenly are. More and more individuals need help with foreclosure and housing, safety from domestic violence and elder abuse... just to name a few of our most pressing areas of practice.

Lost track of your appeal letter? Let us know and we'll send you another.

For all those who have so generously responded already, Thank You once again!



# Staff News...

## Moving On

Michele Ortiz, Immigration Unit attorney has moved to Miami where she will continue her immigration work with FIAC.

Dawn Marie Bates Buchanan has resigned her GLS position to start a private practice in Bradenton.

Ken Wilson, BRAIVE project attorney has resumed private practice in Bradenton.

Claire St. Jacques, TPS project paralegal is pursuing graduate coursework at USF-Tampa.

*All of us at GLS bid Ken, Michele, Dawn and Claire a fond farewell and wish them well in their new endeavors.*

## On the Move



James Kushner formerly with the Sarasota office has transferred to the Bradenton office where he is the Elder Law Attorney assisting Title III clients.



Lisa Murray formerly with the St. Petersburg office has been promoted to Managing Attorney in Bradenton where she will continue her immigration work as well as oversee office operations.

## Welcome



Nora Hewitt -  
New receptionist & intake specialist in Bradenton

## New Board Members



*Donna Blazevic, Esq., Alena Miles, CPA, Lynn Hanshaw, Esq. and Keith Bass.*

## Staff Happenings



Kathlyn Mackovjak, Immigration Unit Supervising Attorney, was a featured presenter at the Human Trafficking and the Efforts Toward The Abolition of Modern Day Slavery seminar presented by the Sarasota chapter of the Florida Association for Women Lawyers. Board member Evelyn L. Moya, Esq. organized the event which provided 5.5 CLER credits for attendees and benefitted GLS.

The Florida Legal Services Legislative Institute has recognized Elizabeth M. Boyle, Esq. Sarasota Managing Attorney as a Certified Legislative Advocate.

Ms. Boyle was also installed as president of the Sarasota County Civic League at the annual luncheon on May 17, 2011. Sarasota contract attorney Robin Stover was also installed as the 2<sup>nd</sup> vice president at the luncheon

## Upcoming Events... Mark your Calendars!



Events...

NEXT (Next Executive Team) Celebrates its 1<sup>st</sup> birthday on July 13<sup>th</sup> at The Hangar in St. Petersburg! Watch for your invitation and join the fun!



GLS  
SUNSET BBQ  
on Redington Beach  
October 6<sup>th</sup>



## GLS Hosts Legal Corps Fellows

Gulfoast Legal Services is benefitting from an excellent program created by the University of Miami called Legal Corps. Under this program recent graduates of the University of Miami Law School who are awaiting employment can gain valuable experience while helping low income clients. Currently GLS has two attorneys in the St. Petersburg office working under the auspices of this program. They are assisting homeowners in the process of trying to save their homes from foreclosure and working in LITC program. Legal Corps sponsors the attorneys for up to six months, paying a stipend to the participants.

Florida Coastal School of Law in Jacksonville has a very similar program. Under their program, attorneys are housed in two of the GLS offices for a period of up to three months. Florida Coastal reimburses GLS for a stipend provided to these attorneys. In these difficult economic times, these attorneys have been a great help in providing assistance to homeowners involved in the housing crisis.



Joseph Czarnik, a Legal Corps fellow from the University of Miami, found a position with a Tampa law firm. Joseph reflected on his time at GLS before leaving his fellowship work in the Sarasota office. "I think the most important lesson I learned at Gulfoast was more of a

recommitment to why I went to law school. I found that every day I was at Gulfoast went by extremely fast because I enjoyed using what I had learned in law school and studying for the bar to help people who genuinely needed it. I was immediately hooked with my first client. It was incredibly fulfilling to represent a woman in an unemployment appeal and make sure that she received the benefits she deserved and truly needed in these desperate times.

Joe continued, "Prior to working at GLS I knew I leaned toward practicing real estate law, but I never would have imagined how great it felt to help a tenant fight retaliatory evictions. I will never forget successfully fighting an eviction case in which the tenant complained about raw sewage backing up into her showers. The tenant had been complaining for months and finally notified the landlord that she would be withholding rent in seven days if he did not fix the problem. In response, the landlord shut off her water and filed an eviction case. I was able to successfully get the water turned back on and saved the client \$1,400 in rent after the case was dismissed by the judge. Working at GLS has been a joy and an honor. Each way was over an hour commute from Tampa, but I always was able to get up in the morning and look forward to working with an incredibly professional group of people helping those in need."

## Monica's Journey to Permanent Residence Status

Monica came to the United States to escape domestic violence in Mexico and to find a better life. She quickly found work as a farm worker in Manatee County. But that wasn't the happy ending she was looking for. She was exploited both physically and financially.

Monica first sought help from Gulfoast Legal Services in 2004. She had been threatened with the loss of her trailer because the landlord of the mobile home park had let the property run down to the point of condemnation. GLS was able to help her with her housing problem but couldn't help her with her immigration problem at that time.

She came back the next year after suffering serious injuries from a hit and run accident. Because Monica had been the victim of a violent crime who cooperates with the investigation she was able to qualify for a U-Visa. GLS Helped Monica apply and her case was approved. Monica was then able to bring her two daughters from Mexico as a result of the approval. It was an emotional scene when Monica was reunited with her daughter at the Tampa Airport in October 2010 after having not seen her since she was three years old.

Finally Monica qualified for getting her 'green card' in March 2011. GLS helped her apply for permanent residence as a person who had held 'U-Status' for three years. Now reunited with her daughters and her legal status secure, Monica is finally living her American dream. She's learning English and hoping to take some courses so she can become a Certified Nursing Assistant.



*Have you remembered Gulfoast Legal Services in your estate planning?*

### *Mission Statement*

*Gulfoast Legal Services is a regional non-profit organization dedicated to providing comprehensive, personal legal advocacy, counseling and education for vulnerable individuals and families.*



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Executive Director

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