

HELP FOR 'STORE FRONT' LAWYERS

MERCEDES CANO STOPS MID-SENTENCE to let the No. 7 train from Manhattan to Flushing, Queens, roar by overhead. The line is nicknamed the International Express, and the street scene in front of Cano's office in Jackson Heights shows that the moniker is apt.

Shoppers scurry by chattering in the languages of Asia, while Colombian shopkeepers hawk their wares in loud, expressive Spanish. Up and down this busy thoroughfare, hundreds of people representing dozens of cultures hurry about their errands, sometimes stopping to chat or ducking into a shop for a cup of strong Colombian coffee.

After the train passes and the traffic ceases momentarily, Cano resumes her trek across the street from a coffee shop to her office. She walks as quickly as she talks, telling the story of her Centro Comunitario de Recursos Legales—which translates to Community Legal Resource Center. She explains what the clinic means to this community and how she came to be its point person.

"Some Saturdays, we have people standing in line all the way down to the street," she says over her shoulder as she climbs the steep, rickety stairs to her tiny office. She shares the second floor of this old commercial two-flat with a barber shop.

Cano moved the headquarters of her operation from her nearby

CUNY's Community Legal Resource Network Is Thriving—and Growing. Now, Other Law Schools Are Joining to Support Solo and Small-Firm Practitioners.

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ABA PHOTO/STEVE KNIGHT

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*Starting the Jackson Heights clinic
was one of the 'best decisions
I ever made.' —Mercedes Cano*



CUNY's commitment to social justice led to the resource network for its law grads. 'It's about what an institution values.'

—Kristin Booth Glen

apartment to the Jackson Heights office in 2001, before she even passed the bar exam. The idea, says Cano, was to provide quality, affordable, accessible legal services to clients who otherwise would slip through the gaps in the legal system. They don't meet strict low-income guidelines for free legal help, but they cannot afford the rates charged by big firms.

Cano's clinic is part of the mission of the Community Legal Resource Network, a web of support services for alumni at her alma mater, the City University of New York School of Law. In fact, Cano initially staffed her clinic with volunteer resource network attorneys.

Begun in 1999, the resource network links solo and small-firm attorneys with each other and with mentors and other experts who can help with everything from law practice management to technology to substantive continuing legal education courses.

The program is a practical tool for idealistic lawyers who want to make a difference and still pay their bills, says member Margaret McIntyre, a Manhattan employment lawyer. "CLRN is a reminder that it's possible to do this work and make a living."

The program strikes deals collectively with online legal research companies, office suppliers and the like so that solo lawyers can realize volume discounts similar to those offered to big firms. Among the program's biggest benefits is access to a technology specialist who helps solo lawyers find affordable equipment, then installs it and trains them how to make the best use of it.

The network also provides a listserv where member at-

torneys can ask questions on substantive areas of law or procedural matters in various local jurisdictions, or find referrals for clients. Or, as is often the case, it is where they can seek the support and understanding of other lawyers who also struggle daily with the pressures of small-firm practice. Members sometimes gather face-to-face to share a pizza and vent about whatever is on their minds, an outlet that can be more vital to mental health than can family members and friends, however well-meaning.

"It's really important for me to stay connected to people who feel the same way I do about the way the law should be," says McIntyre. "I get inspired every time I get together with the members."

Cano got together with a group of resource network attorneys and CUNY law students for another purpose: to give more than 300 workshops at churches, schools and community centers on topics ranging from immigration to landlord-tenant issues to employment law. Her participation in the first year after opening her community clinic brought new clients.

"The only topic that did not bring many people out was applying for government benefits. They don't care about benefits; they have jobs," says Cano.

In 10 months, Cano and her crew also took on some 1,700 cases from people who stood in line all day for a chance to pose their legal quandaries to lawyers who promised to help. The advice is not free, but rates are set

at a level that working-class families can afford. Installation plans are offered to those who need them.

"Without CLRN, there's no way I would have thought I could take this on," says Cano. "I had two or three offers for good jobs. My mother begged me to take one of them. Doing this was one of the toughest, but best, decisions I ever made in my life."

Maria Toy, who does immigration work with many referrals from Staten Island's sizable Liberian community, says she would have given up many times if not for the network members who pick her up when she feels overwhelmed. "You go to your family and tell them your issues, and they look at you in horror and say, 'Why don't you just quit? Get a job working for somebody else.' But the CLRN people have been through the same stuff and they show you how to find your way out of the low spots."

OUTGROWTH FROM 'KITCHEN TABLE' PRACTICES

THE COMMUNITY LEGAL RESOURCE NETWORK WAS LARGE-ly the inspiration of CUNY law school's energetic dean, Kristin Booth Glen. The law school was founded in the early 1980s to uphold the same principles that apply to all of the City University's colleges: access for as many students as possible, with an emphasis on diversity and giving back to the community.

The law school's story is more complex than the average test score and grade point average of its students. An applicant with excellent academic credentials will usually not be admitted absent some showing of commitment to social justice, while a student with a passion for helping

people might be admitted with a marginal LSAT score. Most of the students have goals of working in small firms or solo practices, often in underrepresented communities across New York City.

"It's about what an institution values," Glen says of CUNY's mission and the students who attend.

When Glen came to the school in 1995, she looked for ways to help its alumni succeed after graduation. She began hosting regular dinners in her Upper West Side apartment for small groups of alumni and asking them what more the school could do to help them.

She found that a lot of alums were running what she calls "kitchen table or storefront practices" that were financially precarious and left the lawyers vulnerable to malpractice because they took every case that came in the door, often without any experience in a particular area of law.

So she wondered whether there was a way to give these kitchen table lawyers a sense of being in a firm: the backup of more experienced attorneys, the reassurance of training and mentoring, and the financial rewards of an efficient practice that uses affordable technology.

Thus was born the idea for CLRN. Two hurdles stood between the idea and a workable program: how to pay for it, and where to find someone to run it. That person had to have the proper mix of commitment, know-how and charisma to convince busy solo lawyers that membership would reap returns.

The school turned to an alumnus from its first graduating class, Frederick P. Rooney, 49, who had opened a law practice in Pennsylvania focusing on mostly Latino low-wage earners needing quality, affordable legal help. Rooney, a former social worker who grew up on suburban Long Island, has traveled in Central and South America working with community organizations.

Network members say Rooney is the glue that binds the program and the members to each other. He goes out of his way, they say, to find solutions to issues a member has, and always has time to lend a supportive ear.

"I look at this job as payback to those who helped me get my practice started. It's an innovative approach to increasing access to justice, and who wouldn't want to be a part of that?" says Rooney.

The network membership now numbers more than 100 alumni of CUNY law school, up from an original 30 or so core members at its inception in 1999. Rooney knows nearly everyone by name. He keeps stacks of their business cards on a table in his large, messy-with-purpose basement office at City University's Flushing campus near Shea Stadium.

The network office also serves as a gathering place for its members and CUNY law students who thrive on the constant activity. Rooney often hands one member another's card and suggests ways they can be mutually helpful, or he finds a student to do legal research for a member with a time-consuming legal issue.

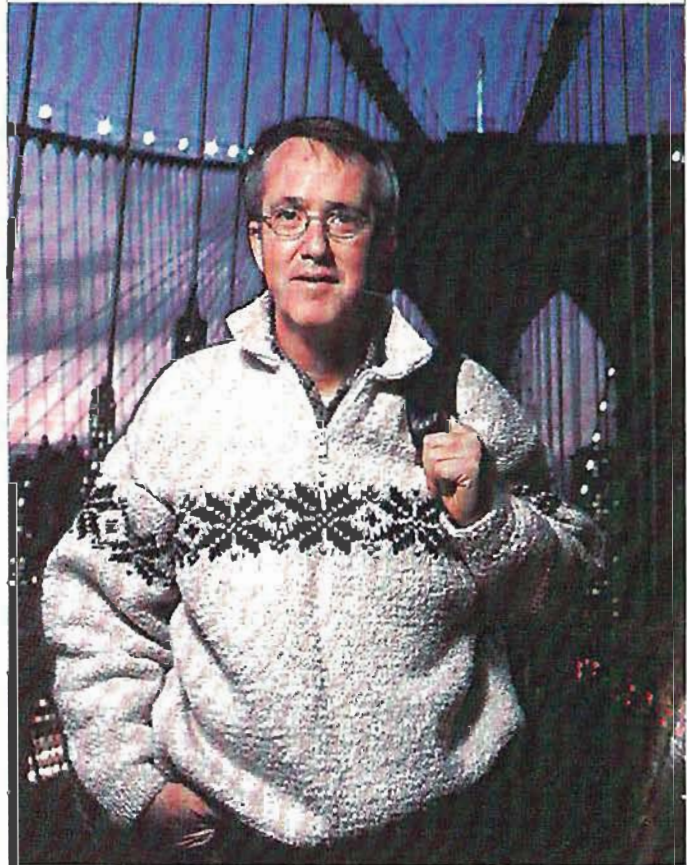
The solution to how to pay for the program came when CUNY discovered that several other law schools were

making plans to launch similar programs. It teamed with the law schools at the University of Maryland, Northeastern University in Boston and St. Mary's University in San Antonio. They formed the Law School Consortium and filed a grant application with the Open Society Institute for startup money in 1997. (St. Mary's has since dropped out after a new law school administration decided to focus on the needs of current students, rather than alumni.)

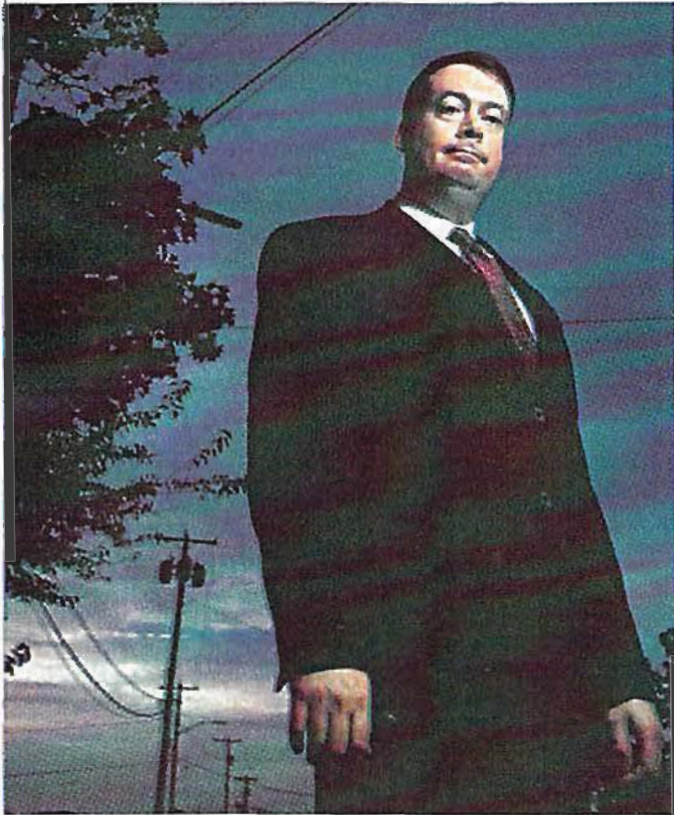
A handful of other schools have joined the consortium with expectations of opening similar solo and small-firm support networks. The consortium membership now includes: CUNY; Maryland; Northeastern; Touro Law Center in Huntington, N.Y.; New York University Law School; Thomas Cooley Law School in Lansing, Mich.; the law schools at the University of New Mexico, Syracuse University, Rutgers University; and, most recently, the University of Michigan Law School.

Like the CLRN on a broader scale, the consortium allows law schools to network and figure out what works and what doesn't when it comes to designing a program. Each school's approach is different, depending on the needs of the community, says the consortium's former director, Deb Howard.

Now a consultant to the program, Howard is a former career services administrator at NYU Law School who accepted the directorship of the consortium because she was attracted to the idea of helping small-firm lawyers serve underrepresented communities, she says.



'I look at this job as payback to those who helped me get my practice started. It's an innovative approach' to accessible legal help. —Frederick Rooney



graduation when they choose to attend New Mexico.

That has certainly been the case at CUNY, according to dean Glen. The school has always attracted students with a social conscience, she says, but now they are finding that practical assistance extends beyond graduation, and students are impressed and encouraged by the success stories of CLRN members.

HIGH HOPES FOR HELPING WORKERS

TAKE, FOR EXAMPLE, MICHAEL J. MEEHAN. THERE'S A SYMBOLIC, thriving rubber tree in his Hicksville, N.Y., office. Like the ant in the song who had high hopes of moving a similar plant, Meehan opened his one-man law practice with hopes of helping the thousands of immigrant workers who flock here each year for jobs tending the manicured lawns and gardens of Long Island's wealthy residents.

Meehan chose the location because of its easy access for his intended clients, most of whom are from Central and South America and speak little English. Meehan speaks no Spanish. He had only a few connections in the immigrant community here when he set up his practice in a nondescript two-story building next to the railroad tracks, above a bar and a tattoo parlor. For a long time, he had no secretary or anyone to serve as a translator between him and his clients. He just learned to be patient, speak clearly and listen closely.

Offering payment plans to those who can't pay all at once has proven to be the answer. 'These clients are proud. They want to pay.' —Michael Meehan

The Maryland program, for example, does not limit participants to Maryland law school alumni. It includes a strong component for current law students to gain experience by doing legal research for lawyer members, says Dennis Murphy, who runs Civil Justice Inc. in Maryland. The focus of Murphy's program is providing legal help to first-time homebuyers, although many of the member lawyers do other sorts of work.

"The folks in our network are committed to making a difference in people's lives, and they're doing that," says Murphy.

At the University of New Mexico program, called the Access to Justice Practice Network, solo and small-firm lawyers work closely with the law school's clinic. The program began with lawyers simply agreeing to take pro bono and reduced-fee cases that were rejected by the clinic because the client did not meet its income guidelines or the case may have been too complex.

Director Antoinette Sedillo Lopez says that her program started in August 2002 as a way to support the lawyers who have been so helpful to the clinic.

"I think of this as a good way to support them back," says Sedillo Lopez. So far, the New Mexico program has held a few free CLE courses, and she expects to get a listserv and some technology assistance up and running soon.

Sedillo Lopez says that she believes the Access to Justice Practice Network will also prove to be a good marketing tool for the law school, as students who want to run solo practices discover that they will be supported after

Now, like his rubber tree, Meehan's practice is thriving. The reason, says Maria T. Umanzor, who began as a client and later came to work for Meehan as his assistant and translator, is Meehan's devotion to doing right by his clients. Despite the fact that there are Spanish-speaking lawyers around, clients now go out of their way to seek Meehan's representation because he has gained a reputation for competence, fairness and genuine kindness.

"He listens to what clients want and helps them get that. He keeps going until he fixes the problem, whatever it is," says Umanzor.

Meehan also offers payment plans to those who can't pay all at once, even though his fees are reasonable. He is nonchalant about his willingness to wait months, sometimes years, for full payment. The reason, he says, is that he rarely gets stiffed.

"These clients are proud. They want to pay. I had a guy who made barely above minimum wage. He owed me a few hundred dollars. He showed up here every Friday with his pay and gave me \$20 or \$30 before he even went to buy groceries for his family," says Meehan.

Umanzor came to Meehan seeking a divorce. Other lawyers she talked to wanted to charge huge fees upfront because Umanzor's estranged husband had moved to Florida and his assets would have to be tracked down.

Meehan says that CLRN has helped him grow his practice into new areas of law, and helped him learn law practice management skills. "I know that there are other attorneys I can call to ask questions or refer clients, and I know they'll treat me and my clients right." ■