

A decade of sharing legal knowledge, experience, and resources

By Paul Lin | Photography by Holger Thoss

Anne M. Crawley (CUNY Law '97) has taken on a child custody case for a client of modest means and needs to prepare a motion to move up her court case. It's nighttime, but she could use some feedback from a peer ahead of the hearing, to make sure everything goes off without a hitch.

"You have to articulate what you want to a judge with 40 cases that day who will say: 'Counselor—what are you looking for?'" Crawley says.

In a law firm, she might wander down the hall to talk to a partner. But Crawley has no colleague to physically turn to. She's surrounded instead by towers of legal files at the solo family and matrimonial law practice she's run from her home in Sunnyside, Queens, for the past four years.

Still, she's not alone. One email later, a network of practicing lawyers knows she needs help, and, within the hour, her BlackBerry buzzes with discourse and advice on what to do.





*Pearl O. Murphy
(CUNY Law '93)
CLRN member since: 2000
Practice: The Law Office of
Pearl O. Murphy, taking on
low-bono and sliding-scale
cases with a focus on wills,
trusts and estates, and elder
law.*

Crawley and hundreds of other alumni with solo and small practices have a virtual law firm at their fingertips, and it's free of charge: CUNY Law's Community Legal Resource Network, also known as CLRN.

"CLRN enables our graduates to continue to share and to continue to collaborate, which is really the spirit instilled in all of us when we came to study here," says CLRN Founding Director Fred Rooney (CUNY Law '86). "It's what sets CUNY Law apart from other law schools."

CLRN has made it possible for CUNY Law to take part in educating and nurturing graduates long after they've crossed the stage to pick up their diplomas, an idea "as revolutionary as the concept of clinical education was 30 years ago," Rooney says.

For the past decade, CLRN has been a lifeline for graduates—whether they operate from kitchen tables or a storefront office—trying to meet the challenge of increasing access to justice for people who most need legal help but can't afford it. Members share legal knowledge and experience with others.

"Each of us can always tap into a wealth of information from other lawyers committed to providing affordable legal services whenever possible. I think the knowledge that we share that commitment makes each of us more willing to help each other and trust each other," says Margaret McIntyre (CUNY Law '95), who practices employment law. "When I need a form or sample of a document I've never used before, I can almost always get one from CLRN. I've also been able to get advice on practical strategies that save me enormous amounts of time, which benefits both me and my clients."

A glance at CLRN's listserv, an automatic mailing list server that broadcasts email to everyone on the list, shows the breadth of topics on any given day—immigration, family law, general practice, employment discrimination, bankruptcy, real estate, and more—and how willing and ready members are to help their peers. It's as easy as: "This is what you need? I've done it," remarks CLRN Associate Director Lisa Reiner (CUNY Law '90).

CLRN wasn't always such a virtual law firm. The 30 graduates recruited for its first year used to meet in-person at the CUNY Law building in Flushing once a month. Less than a third of the CLRN members in 1999 knew how to use email, so organizers helped them set up their computers and provided basic training on how to use the Web.

After that, attendance at monthly meetings began to drop dramatically, while at the same time, Rooney saw a huge increase in information that members sent back and forth any time of day or night. Once the listserv came out in the early 2000s, it became apparent that the virtual communications model would win out over people battling rush-hour traffic.

"People knew their needs were being met electronically," he says, a little wistfully.

Over the years, CLRN has proven its ability to act as a conduit for case referrals for CUNY grads. Joy S. Rosenthal (CUNY Law '96), whose solo practice covers family law and mediation, as well

as wills, probates, and estate planning, cites a CLRN-member-referred case in which her client, a woman married to a man with a volatile temper, wanted to protect her interests and those of her children through a collaborative divorce. Another referral netted Rosenthal a protracted litigation case that enabled her client, a gay man, to get back foster children who had been awarded by the Department of Social Services to his ex-partner; the client is now preparing to adopt the children.

"I don't think I would have gone out on my own if it weren't for the support that CLRN provides," Rosenthal says.

CLRN also tends to the entrepreneurial side of solo and small practices, its members sharing their know-how and even basic office resources through CLRN's incubator program at a time when some may be struggling to provide low-bono legal services, in which fees are scaled to what the client can afford. And CLRN provides low-cost continuing legal education (CLE) and obtains discounts for members on technology and research that some might not otherwise be able to afford.

You can find CLRN members in the smallest home-based practice or in the Office of the Mayor of New York City.

"CLRN is about empowering the community—how to make the law work for all," muses Gregorio Mayers (CUNY Law '94) as he negotiates the vaulted corridors of City Hall, huge painted portraits from the Empire State's past staring down. Mayers serves as a senior policy advisor overseeing zoning matters, capital projects, development, and education. But he still makes time for CLRN, recalling how it helped him when he had a practice in New Jersey focusing on immigration and labor cases.

"I don't know how I would have made it without [CLRN]," Mayers says. "What they've done is taken [solo practitioners] from the one-yard line and given us a jump start on the 50-yard line. What a magnificent idea!"

The seeds of CLRN may be found just across the way from City Hall, in Manhattan Surrogate's Court, a weighty, granite-columned building topped by a mansard roof, and the seat of Judge Kristin Glen, Dean of the Law School from 1995 to 2005.

"There is nothing of which I am prouder in my life, in 40 years of practicing law in the service of human needs," says Judge Glen, as she remembers the early days of CLRN over black coffee in her well-appointed, wood-paneled chambers. "It's a dream come true. And it's a dream about social justice."

As incoming Dean in the mid-1990s, she wanted to meet the School's graduates and invited each class to her home for an informal meal and a chance to talk about their lives as practicing attorneys. She discovered many graduates had chosen to set up small and solo practices in underserved communities, after having started their career path at Legal Services, a District Attorney's office, or a law firm.

"They wanted to serve communities that are really hurting for competent and affordable lawyers," says Judge Glen.

It became clear to the Dean that because CUNY Law had recruited and trained people from historically underserved



*Francis Noh
(CUNY Law '97)*



*Joy Rosenthal
(CUNY Law '96)*

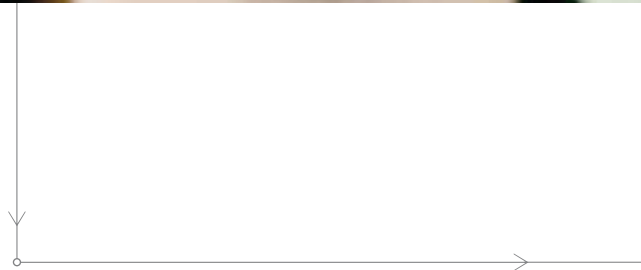
**“There is nothing of which I am prouder in my life,
in 40 years of practicing law in the service of
human needs.”**
—JUDGE KRISTIN GLEN



Judge Kristin Glen



*Margaret McIntyre
(CUNY Law '95)*



FRANCIS NOH

>About 30 minutes outside Manhattan, you'll find the law offices of Francis Noh (CUNY Law '97) in Closter, New Jersey. It's not far from New York, but it's far enough for Noh to feel like a CLRN outpost in Bergen County at the solo immigration and litigation practice he opened in 2000.

"I am a very isolated person in northern New Jersey," sighs Noh from his two-room office, encircled by maroon transactional case files and boxes of litigation documents.

The isolation is compounded when Noh goes to court and comes up against a table of lawyers from a big firm.

"You feel very lonely, like: 'Oh man, I will have big trouble.' That's how you feel as a solo practitioner," he says.

That has changed for Noh since CLRN's inception.

"Once you find out at least you have someone to consult with, that is a huge, huge relief! I really am grateful," says Noh.

KATYA PLOTNIK

>The Main Street/Flushing stop on the 7 train brings more potential immigration cases to Rodriguez & Plotnik.

Five floors up from the bustling street, Partner Katya Plotnik (CUNY Law '94) speaks in Spanish on the phone with a client who has provided many Dominican referrals. "Twenty-five percent of business is word of mouth," she says. "If you do good, it's the best advertising."

It's that way with CLRN as well. A CLRN-sponsored education seminar Plotnik held for the Guinean community yielded a low-bono client whom Plotnik helped get a green card. He referred half a dozen friends who, in turn, referred more clients.

"It's been a great opportunity for me to break into a new ethnic community. For this, I must thank CLRN!" says Plotnik.

communities to become lawyers, it had a responsibility to prepare them to return and help the communities from which they had come. But returning had taken a huge toll on many graduates who hung out their shingles.

After listening to the graduates, the Dean realized that CUNY Law had a responsibility to help them succeed; many who had gone into practice alone did so at great personal cost.

"This resonated for Kris, because she herself had been a small-firm practitioner trying to do public service work," says Professor Susan Bryant. The former Director of the Law School's clinical programs was also once the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs during the Dean Glen era, and is credited by Judge Glen as being CLRN's co-mother.

"We started doing focus groups with our grads about what kind of support they might like and find useful in being excellent practitioners," Prof. Bryant says. "Probably the only place where that was at all addressed was in bar associations."

But CUNY grads, the Deans discovered, felt that the bar associations at that time did not speak to them, in part, because of their lack of ethnic and class diversity, and, in part, because of their focus on clients who could easily afford legal services. Deans Glen and Bryant realized the opportunity for CUNY Law to reconceptualize legal education as extending beyond the three years of classes through a network of supportive alums.

Funding had to be the first step to get CLRN off the ground, but, at the time, it was impossible to raise money from state sources with the University in retrenchment mode.

But Dean Glen knew where to turn. CUNY Law had just gotten a grant from the Open Society Institute (OSI), the philanthropic organization founded by George Soros, to fund a project helping immigrant communities. It wasn't a stretch to get OSI to consider funding what would become CLRN, especially when joined by three other law schools in what was called the Law School Consortium Project (LSCP)—Northeastern, St Mary's in San Antonio, Texas, and University of Maryland.

"One of the largest contributions is the idea of working 'low bono,'" says Brenda Bratton Blom, the University of Maryland School of Law's Director of Clinical Programs. Maryland's community law model evolved over the years into Civil Justice, Inc., an independent nonprofit affiliated with the law school, with over 100 solo and small-firm practices in its network focused on consumer law and foreclosure issues.

With the grant money that came in 1998, CLRN began searching for a Project Director, and decided on Fred Rooney, a former social worker and member of the first class of CUNY Law. Although he might have connected with a big firm, he instead had fulfilled a dream of returning to his hometown of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and opening a successful practice to serve its large Latino community.

His first job after law school, at age 32 and with a growing family, was with a Legal Services program in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

"Ironically, my income was so low that if I had gone in as a client to apply for Legal Services, I would have been eligible under federal poverty guidelines," he recounts from a circular worktable in his office at CUNY. "I had to get federal assistance through the WIC program, fuel assistance to keep the house warm, and subsidized daycare for my children."

After a year, and after coming uncomfortably close to needing food stamps, Rooney decided to start his own law firm with a friend, developing professional and small business skills along the way—"baptism by fire," as Rooney puts it—gradually building up clients and adding lawyers to the firm.

When the CLRN offer came, Rooney took a two-year leave of absence from his firm, but in the end he chose to work at CUNY full-time, as CLRN continued to grow.

"It's been an amazing way of helping people who, after graduation from CUNY, found nobody to turn to, no place for help," Rooney says, adding that, for him, CLRN has been a



*Michael Davidov
(CUNY Law '05)
CLRN member since: 2005
Practice: Davidov & Davidov
of Forest Hills, Queens,
focusing on estate planning
services, elder law, and real
estate law for seniors.*



way to acknowledge through action all the mentoring he received during his early years in practice. “I knew how much I appreciated every ounce of support and encouragement that they gave me. To be able to do that on this scale has been a very, very satisfying part of life.”

Rooney’s leadership and spirit infuses CLRN, whose members remain mindful of the day when they, too, can return the favor.

“CLRN has given me an opportunity to present Family/Matrimonial Law CLEs on several occasions. In addition, I have served as a mentor to new members,” emails Patricia Sokolich (CUNY Law '93), who has benefited from the network—and Rooney’s guidance—on many occasions. “Fred has been an enormous source of support and information, as well as a good friend.” The kudos comes not just from CLRN members. The program recently received Meritorious Recognition from the American Bar Association. “I have been so impressed with the vision of former Dean Kristin Booth Glen,” emails Kathryn Grant Madigan, past President of the New York State Bar Association. “And [Fred Rooney] is such a terrific ambassador for the Law School and for this truly innovative program.”

Rooney has taken his ambassadorial duties further afield, bringing the CLRN model to Pune, India, and the Symbiosis Law School (SLS), on a recommendation from Kiran Bedi, renowned for her social work in India. She received an honorary law degree from CUNY Law School in recognition of her “humanitarian approach to prison reforms and policing.”

“The U.S. is the oldest democracy. India is the largest democracy,” Rooney points out, adding that while neither provides the working poor enough access to legal services, the situation in India can be much graver. “The issues faced by people in developing countries, like India, sometimes are matters of life and death.”

SLS, following CLRN’s example, hopes to provide community lawyering services for thousands of people in the area who cannot afford legal aid.

“I find [CLRN] extremely helpful as a resource for questions that need to be answered by those with previous experience in the same or similar situations. The quickness of the responses also amazes me because I know most of us are extremely busy with our own caseloads.”

**—ROBERTA D. SCOLL (CUNY LAW '96),
STAFF ATTORNEY AND COORDINATING
ATTORNEY FOR THE LANDLORD/TENANT
PROJECT, NASSAU/SUFFOLK
LAW SERVICES COMMITTEE, INC.**

MORE ON THE WEB

For more information go to our website:

www.cuny.law.edu/clinics/JusticeInitiatives/Community.html

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2005

RAHUL CHAKRAVARTY is a partner at M.C. Law Group, LLP in Bridgeport, Connecticut, practicing in the areas of immigration law, family law, and criminal law. He is a member of the Connecticut Bar Association Pro Bono Network and a participant in the International Institute of Connecticut Immigration Law Pro Bono Project.

MIKE DASHMAN began working as a staff attorney at Housing Works, Inc. in November 2008. His primary practice area is landlord and tenant issues, and he frequently runs into CUNY Law alums in his work. He also works with fellow alum Ignacio Jaureguilorda '02.

ANGELA HINES was featured in an article in the *New York Daily News* on Sunday, February 1. The article, titled "Hero Mom Angela Hines Shows She Has Writ Stuff," can be found at www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/queens/2009/02/01/2009-02-01_hero_mom_angela_hines_shows_she_has_writ.html. Angela works for the Legal Aid Society at Queens Family Court.

KATHERINE (HUNG) LOANZON welcomed a daughter, Christina Yi Hung Loanzon, on December 1, 2008. Her husband is Tristan Loanzon of Loanzon Sheikh LLC.

2006

TARA JENSEN began as an Associate with Vladeck, Waldman, Elias & Engelhard, P.C. in the fall of 2008, specializing in plaintiff-side employment discrimination litigation.

2007

OWEN DANIEL-MCCARTER has founded the Transformative Justice Law Project of Illinois, a Chicago-based legal collective that serves low-income and homeless transgender and gender non-conforming

people. He began teaching two sections of Gender and Society at DePaul this past fall. He notes that he misses CUNY people living in the Midwest.

SEAN KUHLMAYER and his wife Isabelle welcomed a son, Cedric Kuhlmeier, on June 6, 2008. Sean's Seattle-based practice, Emerald City Legal Services, is building slowly and steadily. You can visit his website at www.emeraldcitylegalservices.com.

DON NGUYEN works for the NYC Law Department Corporation Counsel and has won the Legal Rookie of the Year Award, making him the second CUNY grad to win the award in recent years. Don has served in the Brooklyn Tort Division for over a year.

2008

LEAH FOSTER is currently living in New Orleans and attending Tulane University, scheduled to complete a master's degree in social work in December 2009. She works at the New Orleans Public Defenders Office as a liaison between clients, lawyers, and various city service agencies. She was also selected to receive studio space at the Creative Alliance of New Orleans Studio at Colton, which currently houses 78 artists and activists and provides tutoring and art classes to students in the 9th Ward.

MATTHEW MONROE is an associate for the law firm of Gentile & Associates, the Manhattan-based plaintiff-side law firm founded by CUNY Law alum and Adjunct Professor Laura Gentile. His practice area includes personal injury, police brutality, and medical malpractice at all stages of litigation. He lives in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, with his girlfriend, Jackie Rovine. He completed the NYC Marathon in November 2008, and is in training to run in the 2009 NYC Marathon.

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"The CLRN model has provided a systematic framework and a clear agenda for our otherwise fragmented, scattered work," finds Dr. Shashikala Gurpur, Principal of SLS, and has already been making a difference. "It works, believe me. Pirangut villagers are convinced of the positive ripple effect of our presence."

Closer to home, CLRN has inspired the creation of Community Lawyers, Inc., a nonprofit organization in Compton, California, shepherded by Luz E. Herrera, Assistant Professor at Thomas Jefferson School of Law. For now, Herrera wants to provide an incubator service—outside the law school—to help attorneys practicing in underserved communities. But she hopes to develop something similar at Thomas Jefferson.

"The CLRN model can and should be replicated throughout law schools across the globe. It's a win-win for the law school and its alumni," Herrera says.

Ten years after CLRN began, there are 17 law schools across the country "providing support to solo and small-firm practices that are committed to doing good and doing well," notes the University of Maryland's Brenda Bratton Blom. "CUNY has been persistent and creative in pursuing the goals of expanding access to justice through building the capacity of the private bar to do public interest work. Keep up the good work for the next 10 years!"

While CLRN has done so much for solo and small practices and has spread its model beyond the borders of New York, its success also reflects positively on the School.

"CLRN gives us very high visibility in the community," says Prof. Bryant. "It lets our funders and government officials see in a very concrete way the work of our graduates. They're not just small-firm practitioners without any relationship to the Law School. These are CUNY Law's graduates doing something in the world. And that redounds to our benefit." ●●