

Community Legal Resource Network (CLRN)

By Emily Sachar

CUNY to Train Start-Up Lawyers in Business Basics to Enhance Justice



CLRN Director, Fred Rooney, brings together like-minded individuals for community based pro bono and low bono work.

Photo by Emily Sachar

CUNY Law School's Community Legal Resource Network (CLRN) has launched the first program in the nation to train recent alumni to set up and run their own small legal practices devoted to clients in underserved communities.

This initiative, the CUNY Law School Incubator, joins the CUNY Business Incubator Network, managed by the CUNY Economic Development Corporation (CUNY EDC), which provides a broad range of resources, counseling, technical assistance, and business development services to nurture and grow early-stage businesses in New York.

The CLRN project will train up to

nine lawyers in its first cycle to tackle everything from billing and collecting from clients to setting up an office, from laying out an advertising strategy to choosing the legal status for their new practice.

"This program will afford me the opportunity to get a great jump-start in the pursuit of my legal career," said Fatai Lawal, 40, of Queens. "The faster I can get up and running, the more I can contribute towards public service. To whom much is given, much is expected."

Added Gabe Munson, 42 (Class of '03, see sidebar), also of Queens, "As anyone can imagine, starting a law practice is fraught with the dangers that face any new business, in addition to the already daunting legal concerns and duties. But, beginnings also present opportunities for growth."

Seven to Start

The initial group of trainees includes Lawal, a Nigerian-trained lawyer who worked at the Law School, Munson, and two other trainees who intend to be sole proprietors.

It also includes three graduates from the Class of 2007 who plan to work together to create their own not-for-profit law firm in Queens. Jay Kim is one of them. "The incubator is able to provide us with guidance in areas that will be critical to our success, such as teaching us entrepreneurial skills and providing us with a strong support network," Kim said.

The goal is to provide the same sort of training to this initial pool of trainees

that graduates receive when they join law firms, corporations and governmental or legal services organizations, according to CLRN Director Fred Rooney.

"Once hired, those graduates receive immediate access to professional training and support, and they have mentors to help with almost every aspect of their professional development," said Rooney, himself a long-time private practitioner. "We want to make sure that the graduate venturing into solo or small-firm practice has the same sort of access to training and knowledge."

The Launch

The training began in October and will run through April 2009. Then, the lawyers are expected to go out on their own and set up practices in communities that are not adequately served by lawyers. Participants are required to commit to using their law practice to provide a wide spectrum of affordable legal services to underserved communities, Rooney said. He hopes a total of 2,000 clients will be served in the first year that Incubator trainees open their firms.

During the training, each trainee will be assigned a mentor from a pool of retired lawyers. Trainees also will have access to Laura Gentile, an adjunct professor at CUNY Law School who will function as an on-site mentor. Training also will be provided by other CUNY Law faculty and by LaGuardia Community College's Small Business Development Center.

CLRN, a nationally-recognized network of collaborative lawyers, currently has 300 alum members who reach out to one another through a list-serv, by phone, and at CLRN events.

Need for the Incubator, Rooney said, is clear. He cited the Legal Services Corp. 2005 Justice Gap Report that noted that,

while there is one private attorney for every 525 people in the United States, there is only one Legal Aid attorney for every 6,800 low-income Americans. Such figures, he said, depict the starkly lower access to attorneys for poor Americans.

Attorneys who work with CLRN and take on so-called low bono, or low-priced, legal work also are eligible to receive compensation from CLRN funding sources, Rooney said.

Incubator training will take place in a suite of offices maintained by Gentile at Fifth Avenue and 27th Street in Manhattan. Lawyers will have access to computers, copiers, and clerical work, Rooney said.

CUNY currently has in place one incubator based at LaGuardia Community College that is devoted to design of everything from dinnerware to jewelry, architecture to graphics. Two other CUNY incubators are under development – one in Manhattan to focus on emergency preparedness and health care innovation, the other a collaboration with the Center for Sustainable Energy at Bronx Community College to focus on alternative energy and environmentally friendly products, according to Carolyn Everett, executive director of CUNY EDC.

The CLRN Incubator, however, is unique in CUNY history, Everett said. “The work of

these public-minded, dedicated and enthusiastic young attorneys will address populations in need of significant legal assistance in critical areas ranging from housing and medical care to employment and safety issues,” Everett said. She noted that the lawyers are making a personal sacrifice by agreeing to charge significantly lower fees than other lawyers typically charge to serve low-income individuals.

“There is no question,” Everett said, “that these CUNY Law School graduates will have a significant impact on many individuals and, over time, will enhance whole neighborhoods and communities.”

CUNY Defense Lawyer Alum Turns to Incubator to Learn Business

After 15 years as a paralegal and a law librarian for the Legal Aid Society, Gabriel R. Munson decided he had something new to prove. He wanted to become an attorney. “I’d been around courtrooms for 20 years, listening to lawyers and listening to judges. I thought, ‘I can do this. I can be a lawyer.’ ”

A Queens College graduate, CUNY Law School was a natural place for Munson, 42, to apply. He won admission and earned his J.D. in 2003.

Over the past four years, after returning to Legal Aid’s criminal defense division and posting a winning trial record, his next dream surfaced: he wanted to open his own law practice.

“I had that vision of myself being my own boss. I wanted to direct my own life and my own career,” Munson said. But something was missing.

The son of working-class parents in Queens – his mother is a nurse, his father a retired salesman – Munson feels he has a lot to learn about business. So, he has joined six others this fall to participate in one of the first “Incubator” projects to teach start-up lawyers how to set up their own law firms.

“It’s one thing to know the law,” says Munson, the father of a 3-year-old son who now lives in Jamaica with his wife, Eileen, and has set up his law office at a desk at his parents’ office. “But it’s another to know business.” For instance, he wants to learn the best way to find a proper law office and to negotiate a favorable lease.

He also hopes the Incubator will teach him everything from how to market his business to how to find the best deals on Westlaw, a legal research tool. Currently, he has six clients. For five,



Gabriel R. Munson will be among the first cadre of Incubator trainees.

he is doing criminal defense work; the sixth, he said, is an immigration case.

Munson said he intends to spend as much time as he can at the Incubator, picking up every piece of information he can from the trainers and on-site mentor. “It’s really the opportunity of a lifetime to get this sort of assistance when you’re just starting out,” Munson said. “It feels like a perfect fit for me.”

-Emily Sachar