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From Aspiring to Inspiring...

by Melissa A. Gertz, Esq.,
Executive Director

I can be changed by what happens to me, but I refuse to be reduced by it. ~Maya Angelou

No client leaves my office without first confronting this quote on my door. Yet, it is as much an inspiration to me as it will become for them. I was destined to become a lawyer from an early age, yet not quite in this capacity. But life, as they say, is what happens when you're busy making other plans. And on July 24, 2004, *life* definitely happened, as I became the victim and thankful survivor of a near-fatal car accident. I was left with physical, neurological, and mental wounds requiring countless surgeries and rehabilitative therapies. While other law school colleagues were looking on to their post-graduate years, I was re-learning the most basic of tasks, including being able to *see*.

Fast forward a few years. I had come to know what the miracles and the endless generosity of the doctors, family, and friends meant to my own survival and recovery, and it was time to pay it forward. In New Jersey, there were no non-profit legal services specifically for veterans. And I knew firsthand the complications that come from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder ("PTSD") and Traumatic Brain Injury ("TBI"), the two "signature" wounds of the current wars. I knew what it was like to wake up one day to an entirely different world around you, to have to adapt to a new normal. I had emerged with an acute understanding of what it is like to be disabled, to be forced to fight endlessly for my entitlements *while incredibly ill, medicated, and just trying to get better*. I wanted to change that for others.

And so, the Community Justice Center and its mission were born amidst pizza, beer, and a few others crazy enough to get involved: with an eye toward reducing the need for emergency assistance, and allowing the disabled the financial stability to focus on their medical needs, the Community Justice Center would be a resource providing quality, low to no-cost legal services and information to those disabled individuals who are most in need of quality representation.

We opened in March of 2009 with a well-attended Grand Opening, and to date, have assisted almost 200 people! Working tirelessly on outreach, we have given presentations to more than 30 agencies in Burlington, Hunterdon, Mercer, and Morris Counties. We were invited to be part of numerous events, including Mercer County's Summer 2009 Project Homeless Connect, and the 2-day statewide Veterans Expo in Atlantic City. Local, state, and federal politicians have lent their support and endorsements. We have made great use of free media to promote our services as well—just take a look at our Facebook page and website! In September, I was an invited guest on *In the Public Interest*, a live radio/television show on WIMG (1300AM Trenton) and WZBN (Channel 25 Mercer County), which you may now view on our website.

It is a core belief of ours that the disabled should focus their time and energy on getting better, on becoming more healthy, rather than on the bureaucratic nightmare that can ensue when seeking public entitlements or if involved in legal matters. With effective advocacy and representation, the disabled are free to shift their focus toward improving their health. Healthier people, in turn, mean healthier communities.

While the demand is high and we have done a tremendous job in reaching out to and meeting the needs of our clients, we definitely need the financial support of those around us to sustain and expand our services to the more remote and isolated areas in New Jersey. If you have not done so already, please join our mailing list by emailing community.justice.center@gmail.com, or our Facebook page at CJC Trenton. And feel free to come visit our offices at any time. We thank you for your continued support, and wish you a healthy, happy holiday season and New Year!

~ Melissa



Photo courtesy of Good Life
Photography



Melissa A. Gertz with Board members, from left,
Christina J. Vassiliou, Esq., and Monica T. Parsons

CJC Invited to Attend the Vet Expo

by Lisa A. Turowsky

Sponsored by the State of New Jersey and the G.I. Go Fund, a host of representatives from state and federal government branches, academic institutions, healthcare providers, and one legal services non-profit — the Community Justice Center — welcomed home almost 3000 New Jersey National Guard troops at the Atlantic City Convention Center on August 16-17, 2009. Headlined by Governor Jon S. Corzine, this Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Event was the first among a series of gatherings designed to help prepare the returning veterans for resuming their civilian lives after overseas deployment. In recognition of the fact that about 20% of these troops may suffer from a disabling condition that prevents them from working, the Community Justice Center provided information to veterans, their families and other conference attendees about the two avenues for obtaining disability benefits, the Social Security disability claims process and the VA compensation claims process.

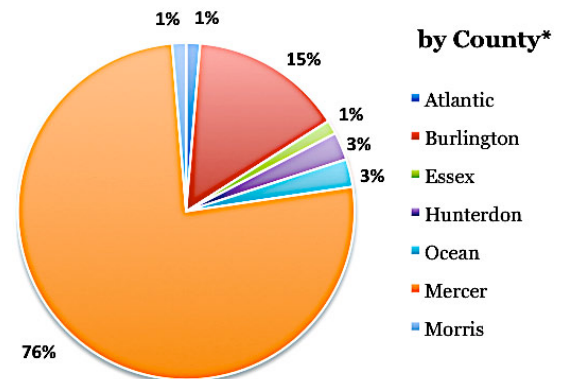
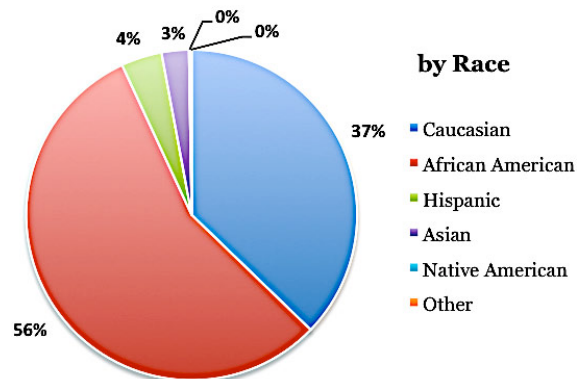
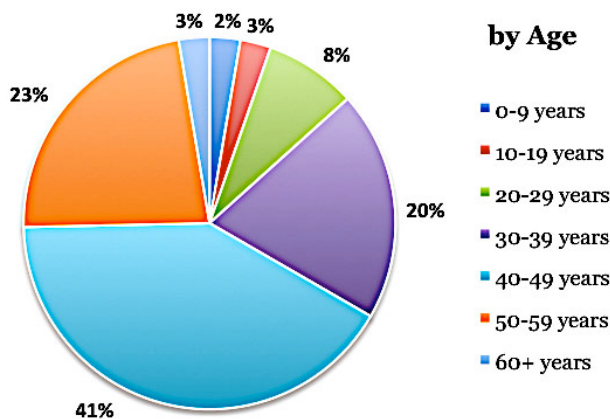


Lisa A. Turowsky with Melissa A. Gertz

More information about the Community Justice Center's Veterans Assistance Project can be found online at www.nj-communityjusticecenter.org. The Community Justice Center has also established ties with the Military Legal Assistance Program, a collaborative effort of members of the New Jersey State Bar Association that provides free legal assistance to post 9/11 servicemembers and veterans. Specific eligibility requirements for their services can be found on the Bar Association's website at www.njsba.com. For more information about the G. I. Go Fund and its future events, visit www.gigofund.org.

Any Way You Slice It, We're Reaching the Community

The Community Justice Center assists the low-income (that is, 175% of the poverty level or below) disabled. The primary populations currently served are the disabled homeless and veterans and their families. Assistance includes full representation, brief service, education/information, and referrals when necessary. Demand for services has been high. In its first 8 months, the Community Justice Center has represented 75 people, provided brief service to 10 people, and provided information and referrals to approximately 150 people. The numbers seem to grow exponentially. For 2010, the Community Justice Center hopes to increase its level of service to approximately 120 open clients. Represented below is the demographic spectrum of the Community Justice Center's 75 current clients.



*Please note that roughly half of CJC's clients are homeless--they have been included in the county in which they receive emergency services.



SUPPORT THE COMMUNITY JUSTICE CENTER!

Combine lower endowments and decreased funding opportunities with a surge in need for client services, and you have a recipe for disaster for our most vulnerable populations. **In today's tough economic climate, your support is essential to help bridge the gap.**

We hope this holiday season that you are inspired by our success, and want to be part of its expansion. With help from people like you, the Community Justice Center can continue to serve those dually impacted by the crushing economy and debilitating medical conditions.

As you begin to plan your end-of-year giving, please remember us generously. All contributions made on or before December 31, 2009 are tax-deductible for this calendar year. Please visit www.nj-communityjusticecenter.org for information on how to donate, including online via Paypal. We greatly appreciate your continued support!

Thanks to our donors for their financial support, time and talent! Special thanks to those who participated in the Community Justice Center's first fundraiser on July 9, 2009.

Foundational Support

Community Foundation of New Jersey, The Mercer Fund

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Clockwise from top left:

1. C. Patterson McKenna, Esq. and Garcia
2. Thakoon Tangtrakul, of Innotech Support Solutions
3. Lisa A. Turowsky, speaking with Jack Ruden, of Barone Technology Group
4. Melissa A. Gertz, Esq., with New Jersey Supreme Court Associate Justice Virginia A. Long
5. Anne Labate, of Segal Commercial Real Estate
6. C. Patterson McKenna, Esq. speaking with Frank Cirillo, Director of the Mercer County Board of Social Services



310 W. State Street, 3rd Floor
Trenton, NJ 08618