

## MELISSA A. GERTZ, ESQ., & THE COMMUNITY JUSTICE CENTER

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

No client leaves Melissa's office without first confronting this quote on her door. While a reminder to her clients of the value of their own voices, it serves as a source of strength and empowerment for Melissa as well.



In July 2004, Melissa was involved in a near fatal car accident. Her head was crushed, her vision and face destroyed, and her mental health and brain function left in question. Countless surgeries and rehabilitative therapies later, she emerged, but not without an acute understanding of what it took for her (still ongoing) recovery to be possible. A victim turned survivor, Melissa understood firsthand the complications that come from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the two signature wounds of the current wars.

Fast forward four years. Melissa's severe visual limitations and immense pain were no match for her calling. Seeing the unmet need and her unique position to help, she started an innovative legal services non-profit that would assist disabled veterans, with an emphasis on those who had fallen through the cracks and were homeless. It would be the first of its kind in New Jersey—truly uncharted territory. Having begun in a poor economy, where many opportunities to open funders' doors were curtailed, and with little knowledge of how to actually run a business, Melissa enlisted the participation of community volunteers from all walks of life, leading to a network of 'experts' and supporters that began to grow exponentially. Armed with her background, vision, and a fantastic supporting cast, the Community Justice Center was born, and opened on March 19, 2009. In short, Melissa went from aspiring to inspiring, rising above her own tragedy and using her unique position to improve the health of hundreds of others.

Three years later, the Community Justice Center is up and running, helping countless homeless disabled and returning veterans with newfound injuries, who previously had nowhere else to turn. Despite the bleak economy, she left her prior employment to fill a huge gap, knowing she was sacrificing her own financial security in the process. Through years of surgeries and therapies, Melissa turned what many might use as a crutch into a motivational force. Melissa's personal battles and triumphs allow her insight that sets her apart—and gives the Community Justice Center's consumers both hope and trust. A fitting testament, Melissa was awarded the *2010 Young Lawyer Service to the Community Award* by the New Jersey State Bar Association and the *2018 Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award* from The Russell Berrie Foundation.

## **BE THAT ROYAL TOUCH OF PURPLE....**

In May 2004, just two months before Melissa's car accident, she was listening to the Commencement Address for Rutgers School of Law-Newark, by (now recently retired) New Jersey Supreme Court Justice Virginia A. Long. Justice Long said something so striking that resonated not only then, but was called upon countless times thereafter, through every medical hurdle:

*"You will have your chance to make a difference. The issue is whether you will take it. You can be an ordinary thread in the tunic or you can be that royal touch of purple which gives distinction to the garment. Be that royal touch of purple to the world."*

Melissa told Justice Long that if ever she would overcome her limitations and have an office, she would paint one wall purple in tribute to her inspiration. Now, not only is there a purple wall, but Justice Long has come by to see it.

If asked, Melissa would tell you that her greatest accomplishment would be found in the evaluations her clients complete at the conclusion of each case. The newfound empowerment and voice many clients discover while working with Melissa is infectious. She is now transforming others' health and well-being, and for that, she is truly inspiring.

### **AWARDS AND ACCOLADES**

- **Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award**, honoring New Jersey's unsung heroes and change agents, from The Russell Berrie Foundation, 2018
- **Young Lawyer Service to the Community Award**, from the New Jersey State Bar Association, 2010
- Invitation to write the cover story for the national publication The Young Lawyer; From Aspiring to Inspiring was published in January 2010
- **Eli Jarmel Memorial Prize**, honoring the greatest interest and proficiency in public interest law, from Rutgers School of Law-Newark, 2005
- **Eric Neisser Pro Bono Award**, honoring outstanding service for the public good, from Rutgers School of Law-Newark, 2005
- **Charles J. Stamler Award**, honoring a demonstrated "humane sense of responsibility to the community", from Rutgers School of Law-Newark, 2004
- **Public Interest Law Foundation Award**, from Rutgers School of Law-Newark, Summer 2003 & 2004
- **Equal Justice America Award**, Summer 2003