

Affiliate Leader Spotlight: Melissa Gertz

By Jill M. Kastner



Melissa Gertz

The difference between a true leader and everyone else is that when the rest of us see a problem, we think: “Someone really should do something about that.” When a true leader sees a problem, she springs into action to create a solution.

Melissa Gertz of New Jersey has proven herself to be a true leader. Even before graduating Rutgers

School of Law–Newark, Melissa devoted herself to serving the poor and disabled in her community. After graduation from law school, Melissa worked as a staff attorney at the Community Health Law Project (CHLP) in New Jersey, representing indigent, disabled people in a variety of civil matters.

Although Melissa helped many people as part of CHLP, she found that she was unable to help her disabled veteran clients get veterans’ benefits. “Every time the issue came up,” Melissa said, “there was no one who could help them.” Melissa tried to find a group in New Jersey that could help disabled veterans obtain Veteran’s Administration (VA) benefits. Unfortunately, no one did this type of work.

“That’s when I decided to start my own nonprofit,” Melissa said. To fill this urgent need, she set out to establish the Community Justice Center (CJC)—“the only nonprofit in New Jersey that could represent veterans to get their Social Security benefits and benefits from the VA.”

Starting a Nonprofit to Help Disabled Veterans

In March 2009, Melissa’s hard work paid off as CJC opened its doors and began serving the disabled and veterans in New Jersey. Melissa and two other attorneys (one works part-time), now serve nearly 150 clients.

Creating a new nonprofit legal services entity is no easy task. “Funding was very difficult, particularly because of the economy,” Melissa remembered. At the time Melissa was ready to set up her nonprofit, state budget problems caused many legal service providers to lay off attorneys. “Many foundations were not taking new proposals . . . and many private funding sources dried up with the recession.”

Eventually, CJC was able to get limited funding through foundation grants, private donations, and fees generated from cases. The CJC also can get reimbursed from the State of New Jersey if it prevails in obtaining benefits from the Social Security Administration (which allows the state to recoup certain past welfare payments).

Melissa also had to learn new skills in her role as an entrepreneur and executive director of a legal service provider. “I don’t have a business background . . . so I had to learn a lot of things along the way,” said Melissa. “I had to learn how to become a state vendor . . .” and “get the necessary training” to be “accredited by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of General Counsel and admitted to appear in VA courts.” She wrote about these challenges in the January 2010 issue of *The Young Lawyer*: Melissa A. Gertz, *From Aspiring to Inspiring*, *The Young Lawyer* 1 (Jan. 2010), available at www.abanet.org/yld/tyl/jan10/aspiring.shtml.

“Our typical clients are disabled veterans who are homeless or on the verge of homelessness,” Melissa explained. “They often need a wide variety of services . . . from benefits to housing.” Representing these clients can be particularly challenging because many do not have telephones or even an address for mailing.

A True Passion for Helping the Disabled

Melissa feels a special connection with many of her clients. In 2004, Melissa was nearly killed in a serious car accident. The accident left her disabled and suffering from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many of her clients likewise suffer from TBI and

PTSD. “Clients are more willing to open up to me because I understand it,” said Melissa.

Since opening its door, CJC has seen hundreds of indigent veterans and disabled individuals in need of legal representation. With the help of volunteers from Rutgers School of Law, Columbia Law School, and others, CJC provides a wide range of services to its clients. CJC also remains the only free legal service provider in New Jersey accredited for Veteran’s Court.

Melissa hopes to expand CJC in the coming year. If she is able to obtain more funding, she plans to hire additional personnel so that CJC can help even more veterans and disabled individuals in New Jersey.

Other Awards and Recognition

On May 19, 2010, the Young Lawyers Division of the New Jersey State Bar Association recognized Melissa at its Annual Meeting and Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where she was awarded the Service to the Community Award. Melissa is also a recipient of the Equal Justice America Legal Services Fellowship, the Haywood Burns Fellowship, the Charles J. Stamler Award, the Eli Jarmel Memorial Prize, and the Eric Neisser Public Interest Program’s Pro Bono Award.

Melissa is a truly inspirational leader who saw a great need to help disabled veterans in her community and has worked tirelessly to fill that need. When creating CJC, Melissa found that the need not only existed in New Jersey, but elsewhere around the country as well. She hopes that true leaders in other states will take up the cause to help protect our nation’s disabled veterans.

Learn more about CJC at <http://nj-communityjusticecenter.org>.



Jill M. Kastner is ABA YLD Communications Director and an Attorney at Legal Action of Wisconsin’s Road to Opportunity Program, removing legal barriers to employment.

New Lawyer Bootcamp Series

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Session number four will delve into the issues associated with building a solo practice. Panelists will address practical considerations and will provide advice to young attorneys who are considering establishing a solo practice or a small firm. The session also will discuss the resources available to attorneys looking to start their new firm, with an emphasis on the resources available through the ABA and the ABA YLD.

The fifth session will focus on how to establish a reputation in the legal community. Panelists will discuss the importance of networking and getting involved in both the legal community and the community at large.

The New Lawyer Bootcamp will conclude with a session addressing the secrets of becoming a superstar associate. Panelists will discuss establishing successful footings in firm practice with the aim of achieving partner status. Current and former associates will give practice tips and pointers for young attorneys to make their mark in various types and sizes of law firms and legal departments.

Stay Alert to New Sessions via Facebook and Twitter

After the Midyear Meeting, the New Lawyer Bootcamp sessions will be posted on the ABA YLD website, www.abanet.org/yld, approximately every six weeks. A notification will be sent out over the ABA YLD Facebook page and Twitter when each of new session is posted. To receive these notifications, “like” the ABA YLD page on Facebook, www.facebook.com/ABAYLD, or follow the ABA YLD on Twitter, <http://twitter.com/abayld>.

Each session in the New Lawyer Bootcamp series is anticipated to last approximately one hour. For completion of the New Lawyer Bootcamp, participants will be awarded a certificate acknowledging their completion of all six program sessions in the series.

For more information about the New Lawyer Bootcamp, check out the ABA YLD website at www.abanet.org/yld/membership or contact Keri-Ann Baker at kbaker@llw-law.com or Rachel Kopp at rekopp@gmail.com.

Midyear Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia: What You’ll Miss If You Don’t Attend!

The ABA YLD will meet at the ABA Midyear Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, February 10–12, 2011. The meeting will feature social events, roundtables, CLE, and the ABA YLD Assembly. You know, of course, that the Midyear Meeting is a great opportunity to network with young lawyer leaders from around the country. And you also will have the opportunity to attend valuable CLE.

The featured CLE programs will include:

- “Diversity in the Workplace: Understanding Micro-Insults,”
- “Recession Proof Your Legal Image for Success,”
- “Bankruptcy Chapter 7 for Seniors and the Disabled,”
- “Attorney-Client Privilege and Interlocutory Appeals,”
- “Using Private Investigators, Facebook and Other Social Media as Informal Discovery Tools,” and
- “Young Lawyer Bootcamp.”

But beyond CLEs, the meeting is a great opportunity to exchange ideas, problems, and solutions with young lawyer affiliate leaders from around the country. For example, if you are a President or President-Elect of a young lawyer affiliate, you are invited to participate in the “Affiliate Roundtable.” And if you are committee leader, you are invited to attend to “ABA YLD Committee Roundtable.”

In addition, all meeting attendees are invited to the “Committee Showcase Reception” where you can network with ABA YLD committee leaders and ABA YLD liaisons and find out what the Division’s committees and liaisons have accomplished and planned for this year.

The **Midyear Gala on Friday, February 11, 2011**, will be hosted at the **Atlanta Aquarium** providing you a unique opportunity to attend a social event at a one-of-a-kind venue. Make sure to buy tickets ahead of time, because the price increases at the door.

On **Saturday, February 12, 2011**, you can attend the ABA YLD’s annual “Diversity Dialogue Breakfast,” the ABA YLD Assembly, and the always entertaining Fellow’s Debate. The Fellow’s Debate is a humorous debate between Fellows of the ABA YLD and Division members.

The ABA YLD programming takes place at the **Hyatt Regency Atlanta**. Registration is open, and the programs are listed online. For more information, please visit www.abanet.org/yld/midyear11.

