Jacques Leandre: MFY’s New Starts Initiative Helps Clients Achieve Self-Sufficiency

We interview Jacques Leandre, Program Coordinator for the New Starts Initiative project at MFY. This interview was conducted by Janet Salas, an Ecuadorian undergraduate at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

Editor: Tell us a little about your background.

Leandre: I attended Morehouse College where I earned a degree in Finance. I worked for an investment bank for two years, then I went to law school at City University of New York School of Law. After that I interned with the New York City Department of Correction as a legal coordinator, but my first job as an attorney was with MFY Legal Services.

Editor: How did MFY Legal Services start?

Leandre: MFY started out as Mobilization For Youth, which was founded on the Lower East Side of New York City to combat juvenile delinquency with the support of the Ford Foundation and President John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy. In 1968, the mission of the legal arm expanded to include all age groups and was incorporated as a separate not-for-profit law firm.

Editor: What triggered your interest in public interest law?

Leandre: I have always been committed to the community from a very young age. After working for an investment bank for two years, I knew that I wanted to extend my professional career to the community and I felt that going to law school would help me in that process. I knew that there were many individuals who were under-represented and individuals who did not have a voice. I wanted to provide a voice, in a way, to express their view and I felt that the legal profession was the perfect way to do it.

Editor: As program coordinator for New Starts Initiative (NSI), can you tell us a little bit about it?

Leandre: NSI is a welfare-to-work project designed to provide concentrated legal assistance to low-income clients moving into self-sufficiency through wage employment or micro enterprise. Based on MFY’s 35 years of experience serving thousands of low-income clients, we believe that problems such as domestic violence, consumer and tax debt, threat of eviction from a home, inaccurate criminal and/or governmental agency records are all formidable barriers to employment and that legal assistance is a necessary part of the solution to these problems. Considering the current environment in light of welfare reforms, there are time limits that are placed on welfare recipients who are going to have to leave the welfare system. Our legal assistance not only helps them to leave the welfare system, but helps them transition as smoothly as possible into permanent employment.

Editor: And it is my understanding that you have partnered with Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS).

Leandre: Exactly, we have partnered with VOLS. VOLS will recruit and train lawyers who are willing to volunteer their services to assist clients in overcoming legal barriers that have hindered their transition from welfare, completing their job training programs, or maintaining permanent employment. VOLS is also responsible for recruiting close to a dozen job training programs which will identify clients in need of such assistance for direct referral to MFY.

Editor: How does MFY go about making legal services available?

Leandre: In making our services available, MFY has established various outreach programs. We do pro se trainings at public housing apartment buildings. We conduct intake interviews at four different locations in the community. We also have phone clinics where clients can call for legal assistance in the areas of housing, welfare and Social Security Income (SSI). Forty-nine percent of the cases that we opened last year were housing cases. Thirty-six percent of the cases were administrative, dealing with Medicaid, public assistance, and SSI. The breakdown of the other cases was 7 percent family, 3 percent civil rights, 2 percent health and 3 percent domestic violence and immigration.

Editor: Where do you get your funding?

Leandre: Ninety percent of our funding comes from public funds; ten percent comes from private. When I say private I mean individuals, law firms, corporations and foundations. The private money is very important to MFY because of the fluctuations in government money and the strings that are attached to it.

Editor: Can you name some of the companies and law firms that have contributed financially to MFY?

Leandre: We actually have a long list of contributors who have been very generous. Among the most generous contributors are American Express Foundation, Schermer Foundation, and — I take the risk of leaving a list of contributors out — many law firms, including Simpson Thacher & Bartlett, Winthrop, Stimson, Putnam & Roberts; Wachtell, Lipton, Rusen & Katz; Debevoise & Plimpton; Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton and Willkie Farr & Gallagher.

Editor: Do you get outside help?

Leandre: We have an associate externship program with Cleary, Gottlieb and Willkie Farr, in which they assign associates on a four month rotation throughout the year. Those associates handle many of the housing cases which help to keep families and individuals from becoming homeless.

Editor: How many attorneys does MFY have?

Leandre: We have approximately 30 attorneys and, including secretaries and staff, we have close to 50 employees.

Editor: How do you go about providing legal services to emerging businesses?

Leandre: We have a referral system where we refer individuals who have a micro enterpreneurial spirit to VOLS. It has a pro bono micro entrepreneurial program and they provide pro bono legal assistance to the owners of micro enterprises.

Editor: Can you cite a specific example of the kind of help provided by MFY?

Leandre: One of the more touching cases involved an ex-convict driver who had fallen behind in his child support obligation and subsequently had his license revoked and was unable to work. Consequently, he became homeless and ended up on public assistance. He was referred to us by the Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, which is one of our community partners, and they entered him in a job training program. While he was in the job training program, we represented him in a New York State Department of Motor Vehicle hearing and succeeded in getting his license reinstated on a restricted basis so that he can just work as a taxi cab driver without driving for any other purposes. Ultimately, we were able to work out an agreement with his former wife and the child support unit and currently he is working full time as a taxi driver. He has found permanent housing and has made amends with his wife. Without MFY Legal Services, this person would have continued to be on public assistance; he would not have been on the road to self sufficiency. I think this is a great case where the synergy that was evident in the partnership of MFY and Lenox Hill Neighborhood House actually helped an individual make the transition from welfare to gainful employment.

Editor: Who is eligible for the NSI?

Leandre: Our clients have to be residents of Manhattan who live from the lower East Side all the way up to 144th Street on the East Side of Manhattan and between 35th Street and 133rd Street on the West Side.

Editor: How do you go about stimulating interest in public service law?

Leandre: By helping other individuals become aware of what public interest law is. Unless you have an awareness of the need for legal representation for the poor, the interest would not be there. I think newspapers like The Metropolitan Corporate Counsel bring awareness of it to an audience that may not necessarily be involved in public interest law and stimulate discussion of the work that we do here.

Editor: How can our readers be helpful to your organization?

Leandre: I think your readers can help by urging their corporations to contribute to MFY and to Volunteers of Legal Service which coordinates pro bono help for low income individuals like excellent base. In addition, readers also can be helpful in getting involved in some of the struggles to provide public funding for public interest law.

For more information about contributing, contact MFY by telephone, (212) 417-3700 or fax 212-417-3890, or contact VOLS by telephone (212) 960-4400 or fax 212-219-8943.