

Equal Access to Justice

Arsht Fellowship Recipient Committed to CLASI's Mission and to Serving the Delaware Community

By Gilberte Pierre, Esquire



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It continues to be both an honor and a privilege to be the current recipient of the Roxana C. Arsht Fellowship, which helps support the work I do at Community Legal Aid Society, Inc. (“CLASI”). The Fellowship provides financial support to newly admitted attorneys to support and encourage the work they do in public interest law.

We have a unique opportunity in our profession to effectuate change and to improve the lives of those in our community. There are many ways to give back, whether it is donating your time or financial support, or pursuing a career in public interest. As I reflect back on the work that I have been blessed to be a part of, I am amazed not only by my colleagues and this Bar, but most importantly by the clients I have met.

In my first two years at CLASI, I focused primarily on victim-based immigration. That experience was a humbling one working with vulnerable immigrants who have been victims of domestic violence or other violent crimes. The clients I worked with showed a tremendous amount of courage to come forward and speak their truth. In working with clients who were victims of crimes, I learned to be a trauma-informed advocate to better serve their needs.

I also had the opportunity to prepare visa petitions on my clients' behalf, and in some cases I was fortunate enough to see the positive outcome of those efforts. The sense of joy you feel when informing a client that their work authorization

has been approved giving them the legal authorization to work is a rewarding experience. It is so easy to take for granted the ability to work in this country, but what it does for our clients is empowers them and gives them an opportunity to financially support themselves and their families in ways they may not have been able to do before. Unfortunately, once a petition is filed, it can take anywhere from twelve months to over four years before a decision is made. Learning to be patient was not an easy task, but it was a necessary lesson in handling immigration cases. The work that my colleagues continue to do in this area continues to inspire me to be a better advocate.

As I have now transitioned into handling both public benefits and housing cases, I have had the opportunity to learn new skills as I represent clients in both administrative hearings and trials. As a public benefits advocate, I have represented clients whose food benefits, medical assistance benefits, or cash assistance benefits have been denied, reduced, or terminated. The ability to have access to medical coverage or to be able to afford food is essential for an individual's well-being, especially for our most vulnerable populations. I have had the opportunity to not only address an individual client's problem, but to help identify problems

that require advocating for broader policy changes that impact a larger population.

In my work in the housing unit, I have had the opportunity to represent clients in landlord-tenant matters, such as eviction cases, and informal hearings. The clients we serve reside in subsidized housing and the consequences of an eviction from their rental unit result in harsh penalties. Those penalties consist of a three- to five-year disqualification from participating in subsidized housing programs. The ability to access legal representation can mean the difference between being homeless and having a roof over your head. The work of our housing unit is to not only prevent

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eviction, but also to ensure fair housing practices for all Delawareans. Under the Fair Housing Program, CLASI provides representation to Delawareans whose rights have been violated under federal and state fair housing laws.

I am thankful to be part of an organization that continues to fight for equal justice for all Delawareans regardless of their social economic status, disability, age, or immigration status — an organization that recognizes that there should

be no barriers to justice for our vulnerable and underserved Delawareans. My colleagues at CLASI continue to inspire me on a daily basis with their vast wealth of knowledge, their thoughtful approach to cases, their dedication to their clients, and their support of each other as advocates.

I am also thankful to the Women in the Law Section of the Delaware State Bar Association for recognizing the importance of supporting work in public interest law through the Roxana C. Arsht Fellowship. As I continue on my path to effectuate change in a positive way, I hope to uphold the great legacy of service of Roxana C. Arsht, and to advance the mission of CLASI. ☺

Gilberte Pierre is a newly admitted member of the Delaware Bar and admitted to practice in New York. She is a staff attorney at CLASI and is a 2014 graduate of Widener University Delaware Law School. She can be reached at gpierre@declasi.org.

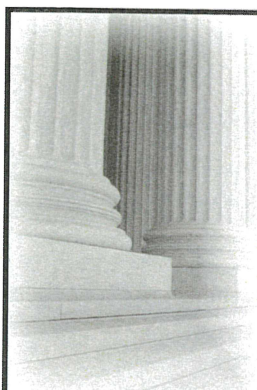


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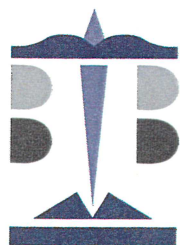
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The law firm of Baird Mandalas Brockstedt, LLC is pleased to announce that Brian V. DeMott, Esq., has joined the firm.

DeMott is a skilled attorney practicing general litigation. Although he will be based in the firm's Wilmington office, DeMott has southern Delaware roots and looks forward to serving clients throughout the state.

In early 2017, BMB expanded into New Castle County with the opening of its Wilmington office. With offices in each county, BMB is one of the few firms offering statewide legal services across a number of practice areas.

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