

SPRING 2018

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# THE DORNSIFE CENTER CONNECTOR

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**NEIGHBORHOOD**

**ADVOCATES**



## DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

Dear friends and neighbors,

Part of our core purpose at the Dornsife Center is to offer resources that help community members feel safe and secure in their neighborhoods. Legal rights are an important part of what it means to be safe, and thorny legal issues so frequently get in the way of a family's ability to feel secure in their homes.

The Community Lawyering Clinic at the Dornsife Center, created and coordinated by Drexel's Thomas Kline School of Law, gives clients the help they need to navigate some of the complicated legal issues that many people in the neighborhood experience. The paperwork and process our law students handle might seem arcane, but the feelings of relief and the important new opportunities that open up after a legal problem has been solved are very real.

In this issue we share the story of a resident who worked with the CLC to finally get legal ownership of her lifelong home, and we meet a law student whose professional career will be informed by the careful work she has done with West Philadelphia residents. We hope you find the information here informative, and we invite you to keep our CLC in mind as a resource for you and your family.

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## PARTNER PROFILE

<i>Name:</i>	Rachel Lopez
<i>Job:</i>	Associate Professor of Law in Drexel's Thomas Kline School of Law
<i>Hometown:</i>	Las Vegas, New Mexico
<i>Current Residence:</i>	Philadelphia's Graduate Hospital Neighborhood
<i>Favorite book:</i>	<i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i> by Jean Rhys
<i>Favorite movie:</i>	<i>Grand Budapest Hotel</i>
<i>Favorite food:</i>	tacos

### *What is your role at the Dornsife Center?*

I direct the Community Lawyering Clinic, which provides free legal services and research on community-wide issues for the residents of the West Philadelphia Promise Zone. It is staffed by law students who provide these services for academic credit. This academic year alone, the CLC has prevented water shut offs, stopped tax foreclosures, and successfully appealed a denial of social security benefits. This year, we also created projects aimed at equipping residents with the legal arguments that they can make to the City's zoning board when voicing concerns about development projects in their neighborhood and at examining the impact of probation on families, individuals, and communities.

### *Where can we find you at the Dornsife Center?*

The CLC is located on the second floor of the Lindy House. From September to April, you can walk-in or make an appointment to meet with our staff.

### *What is your favorite thing about the Dornsife Center?*

I love that the Dornsife Center is a one stop shop, where community members can learn to dance, have their blood pressure taken, and get a will, all in one place.

### *What do you do when you're not at the Dornsife Center?*

I love to go on hikes with my husband Forrest and my puppy Millie.

## A CASE OF TANGLED TITLE A BURDEN HAS BEEN LIFTED

How would it feel when the house that you call home – the place passed on to you by your grandparents and parents, where you have paid the bills and raised your family – isn't technically yours? You can't get a home equity loan, you can't qualify for homeowner and tenant support programs, and you can't sell it even if you wanted to. You can't ever feel completely *at home*.

A Community Lawyering Clinic client we'll call Ms. A – for Anonymous, to protect her confidentiality – recently signed the deed to her home with help from the CLC. She now owns the home after struggling for years with a complicated “tangled title” issue. Tangled title is a problem for many families in Philadelphia, and it happens when you are living in a home that has been in the family or may even have been given in a will, but there was never official paperwork to record ownership of the home in your name.

The deed to Ms. A's house was originally in the names of both Ms. A's grandparents when they purchased it. “My grandmother and grandfather originally bought this house in 1943 and I would say it's a generational home. My mother and her sister were raised in the house when the family came to Philadelphia from North Carolina.” Almost 20 years later in the 1960s, as a grown adult with a family of her own in Washington DC, Ms. A's mother returned to the home with her own family to take care of Ms. A's ailing grandmother. They moved in and stayed.

The family was shaken in 1965 when Ms. A's grandfather walked away from them. But while he had abandoned his family, he had not abandoned his co-ownership of the home. When Ms. A's grandmother passed away in 1990, her grandfather continued to hold the title in his own name instead of transferring it to the members of his family who had been living there.

He passed away in 2002 and in his will he granted ownership of the home to Ms. A's aunt, her mother's sister, who had her own place at the time. This was the moment everything really became complicated: despite the will, Ms. A's aunt never got the home title transferred into her own name, although she was glad to let her sister and Ms. A, her niece, continue to live there. And when the aunt died, there was no longer anybody in the family alive with any legal claim to the home.

Ms. A started to really understand the implications of this when she began in the early 2000s to try to get some home repairs done. “Every time major work needed to be done, all the city programs are for owner-occupied homes or renters, and we weren't really either of those.” You have to have that deed in your name.”

And trying to pay the annual city real estate tax?

Persuading a city office to take money for a home she had no legal claim on, in order to fulfill the tax obligations, was an exercise in frustration. She began to look into how she could fix this problem, and once she started she was determined to get it done.

Ms. A's goal has been to bring peace to her family, and especially to her now elderly mother, by finally settling the matter of the home's legal ownership. She had initially reached out to Community Legal Services but was overextended at that time with caring for her mother, ill with cancer, and found it difficult to get to appointments. When she learned about the CLC at the Dornsife Center through a friend who had also gotten legal support there, she gave them a call.

The students in the homeownership team agreed to take on her case, and they kept in touch with her every step of the way, letting her know about documents they needed from her, about new steps they were taking, and alerting her to new information and developments in her case.

Ms. A started working on her own to untangle the title to her home in 2002, and in June 2018 she was finally able to sign papers getting the home transferred into her name at a meeting in the Dornsife Center's Lindy House. She saved every piece of paper along the way, made notes on every phone call, and never gave up, and the CLC helped her across the finish line.



“Today, ‘refreshing’ does not even begin to describe how elated I feel. It is an end to all of this craziness. It tells me about myself as an individual – it was not easy but I got it done. I'm tired of filling out forms.” Ms. A's mother, now 90, knows that the ownership to this generational family home is secure, and Ms. A says with a wry smile that with this burden finally put down, she can be ready to pick up the next one for her family.



## FROM WRITERS ROOM

We share these two poems from neighborhood writers as reflections on community and security, two important concepts that animate the work that our faculty and students do in the Community Lawyering Clinic..

### **At a Crossroads**

*Victoria Huggins Peurifoy*

Folks on their phones crossing the street  
A child running in the street and being hit  
A car stuck on a train track  
Mother walking her twins  
Dog surveying the crosswalk  
Hundreds of people waiting to cross the street  
A car stuck in the middle of a tree...after hydroplaning  
A van flipped upside down  
A person lying in the street  
A father kissing his baby  
Girls playing double dutch  
A man chasing a bus to get to a woman leaning from the bus



### **The corner store owner leans against the wall**

*Jennesys Aviles*

The corner store owner leans against the wall of his shop smoking a cigarette and asking everyone how their day's been going  
A woman relaxes on her stoop, singing about the weather and flowers and birds  
Young boys practice wheelies on their mountain bikes, riding up and down the streets  
Volunteers paint tulips along the walls enclosing Spring Garden bridge  
James Dupree's art studio appears suddenly and shines among all the new construction  
Vegetables blossom in the community garden

## MORE ABOUT THE COMMUNITY LAWYERING CLINIC

The Community Lawyering Clinic (CLC) is a legal clinic that provides assistance and legal workshops to residents of the Mantua, Powelton Village, and the broader area known as the Promise Zone.

The CLC is staffed by Student Attorneys, usually second and third year law students from Drexel's Kline School of Law. The students represent community members and also work side by side with them on their collaborative projects. The CLC is a yearlong commitment in which the students receive credits each semester and must devote 16-20 hours per week to their clinic work. The Student Attorneys are supervised by Associate Professor and Director of the Community Lawyering Clinic, Rachel Lopez, Esq. The clinic handles a host of different legal matters, either directly or through pro se assistance in which we provide assistance mostly by conducting research. Some of the matters the CLC has handled in the past include:

- Homeownership Issues: tangled title, delinquent property taxes, adverse possession, fraudulent property transfer
- Government Benefits Appeals: SSD and SSI
- Employment Discrimination
- Probate
- Post-Conviction Criminal Issues

The CLC takes new cases depending on its present caseload and available resources. This year, the intake period is September 2018. During this month, the CLC will welcome new cases.

The CLC can help you in any combination of three ways.

**1. Direct Representation:** We can assist by representing you directly. When we take on a direct representation, we may appear in Court, draft and file documents, conduct research, request and submit documents, all on your behalf. What we will do on your behalf when we represent you directly depends on the scope of your Retainer Agreement, which will be explained to you fully before you sign.

**2. Pro Se Assistance:** We can assist you by helping you to represent yourself - this is called "Pro Se." When we assist you in this manner, we may help by conducting research or reviewing and/or drafting documents. What we will do under this form of assistance depends on the Pro Se Agreement, which will be explained to you fully before you sign.

**3. Referral:** We can also assist by providing you with a referral. If we are unable to take your case and represent you directly or assist you in representing yourself, we can provide you with a referral to a legal agency that would likely be able to help you or point you in the right direction.

**The Community Lawyering Clinic does not charge a fee for legal assistance.** The CLC will not charge you anything for the work we do on your case. However, you may be responsible for any court fees or costs associated with your case. The CLC does its best to assist our clients in accessing any financial assistance that may be available to them.

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**Keep up with the Dornsife Center's social media for reminders of the Community Lawyering Clinic's intake process in September 2018. For more information in the meantime please feel free to get in touch:**

**Phone: 215-571-4020**

**Email: [clc@drexel.edu](mailto:clc@drexel.edu)**

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*Ms. Mildred Bond recently worked with the Community Lawyering Clinic on a home title issue. She lives in a home that is deeded to her nephew, Mr. Andre Black, and Mr. Black wanted her to have secure ownership. They connected with CLC students and Professor Rachel Lopez to get help doing this complicated but important property transfer.*



## TAMIKA GAYLE

## PROFESSIONAL TRAINING FOR PUBLIC GOOD

It was a family legacy that led Tamika Gayle to enroll in Drexel's Thomas Kline School of Law. "My grandma in Jamaica was very much involved with politics, and she would take me to all her meetings. So I grew up in an atmosphere of politics and law," she says. Ms. Gayle, who has just graduated with her law degree, has been a student attorney with the Dornsife Center's Community Lawyering Clinic (CLC).

The CLC provides pro bono (that means free) legal services to residents who live in the Promise Zone. "We also provide financial education and other informational workshops throughout the year. Our services mostly, though, are pro bono legal services and referrals."

For law students, the CLC runs as a sequence of two courses in the law school's fall and spring semesters each year, taught by Director of the CLC, Professor Rachel Lopez. The students are divided into three teams that represent some of the most common legal needs in the neighborhood: home ownership, housing and benefits, and criminal justice. At the start of the fall term, the students, along with Professor Rachel Lopez, review the cases brought to the CLC by neighborhood clients, and choose a set to work on for the year.

The kinds of cases the students take on varies. "We see a lot of home title issues. We also see a lot of benefits appeals. We work on employment discrimination. Often our clients need help navigating public agencies like the water department." When a neighborhood resident brings a case that the students don't have the capacity to handle, they always refer that person to an agency or a resource where they can get the help they need.

Ms. Gayle was the head of the housing and benefits team with one other student partner, and as a team they handled a total of four ongoing cases. "As the team head you are leading any research that needs to be done, you're the face the client sees, you are responsible for presenting information to the client, calling them when you need documents, and putting your signature

on things. You handle all correspondence from a given agency on behalf of a client. You are the student attorney on the case."

That is a substantial responsibility and Ms. Gayle notes, "when I started in the CLC I knew I would be responsible for a lot, but I didn't realize it would be this much!" She enjoys the work, though: "I like the face-to-face interaction with clients, and making decisions and driving the interaction with clients helps you learn how to handle different professional situations." That enthusiasm is a big plus for neighborhood clients. "As students we are eager to learn, and that means we try our very best to make sure we provide all the help a client needs from us."



*Tamika Gayle in the Community Lawyering Clinic student office*

Students working with the CLC are at the Dornsife Center three to four days each week to work on their cases: meeting with clients, and making calls and doing research on their behalf. With faculty supervision, the students sometimes represent their clients in court, but cases often involve advocating for clients outside of the court system, for instance advocating for clients with benefits agencies.

In the spring semester, the class does a spring project. "We look at a situation that impacts the whole community and do an information-sharing project around that issue. One of our teams is doing a zoning project in response to the zoning variances that housing developers are using in the neighborhood." That project's goal is to help inform residents of their rights regarding these variances, and strategies they can use to preserve what they value about their community. "Another team project is looking at the issue of mass probation, and a third team is examining the CLC's own processes to make sure we are serving the neighborhood as best we can."

Ms. Gayle is considering a career in corporate law now, and would like to remain in Philadelphia. She'll be carrying along her hands-on experience and commitment to offering her best work to clients as she takes her next steps - and we want to wish her good luck with the Pennsylvania bar exam in the summer!



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