

# THE RECORDER

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**REMEMBERING ITS ROOTS:** Now that the East Bay Community Law Center has raised millions to buy and renovate a larger building, Executive Director Jeffrey Selbin says the challenge will be maintaining the group's "open storefront" spirit.

## NETWORK EFFECT

### East Bay clinic taps web of alums to fund growth

By Matthew Hirsch

RECORDER STAFF WRITER

In 1988, when a group of students at Boalt Hall School of Law set out to launch a legal services clinic for the poor, they scraped together just enough money to rent a small workspace in south Berkeley. For office furniture, the students took a rented van around to Heller Ehrman, Morrison & Foerster and

other Bay Area firms to pick up old, unwanted desks and chairs.

"I swept the storefront office out as my first official duty and put up the letters on the window. They came out really crooked," said Jean Hyams, partner at Oakland's Boxer & Gerson and a member of the first student intern class at what was then called the Berkeley Community Law Center.

How things have changed.

As the center undertakes a search for new leadership to succeed executive director Jeffrey Selbin, it's no longer such a scrappy operation.

More than 1,300 Boalt students have come through the clinic, balancing their coursework with a practice serving low-income clients in Berkeley and beyond. Ten years in, the clinic changed its name to East Bay Community Law Center to accurately reflect its broader client base.

Meanwhile, many of those young, idealistic student interns have become successful attorneys and generous donors, helping EBCLC find a place among the largest and best-funded legal service nonprofits in the Bay Area.

"[The first director] Bernida Reagan took the law center through its infancy, and Jeff took it through its adolescence. Now we're kind of grown up," said Frank Cialone, vice-chairman of the current board of directors and a partner at Shartsis Friese.

By tapping into a deep network of alumni, EBCLC has experienced a level of growth that may have seemed unimaginable in the clinic's early days. Thanks to an almost-completed \$3.25 million capital campaign, the center is in the midst of renovating a larger, modern office building in the same South Berkeley neighborhood where it's located now.

The 16-lawyer center also has managed to call on its contacts at Bay Area law firms to leverage the resources of a much larger organization to help with a relatively new project.

More than 80 volunteer lawyers turned out for an EBCLC-sponsored gathering in October to help East Bay residents clear their criminal records so they can get better access to employment, housing and government assistance. The clinic recruited U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, to promote the event.

"They were very smart, because they saw the need for political leadership," said San Francisco Public Defender Jeff Adachi, a leading advocate for getting some offenders' criminal records expunged. "It's my

hope that we see more of these programs, and certainly the EBCLC program has grown both in notoriety and reputation.”

But it hasn't always been smooth sailing for EBCLC.

About five years ago when Selbin, the executive director, took charge, government funding for legal services was already scarce, and private contributions to non-profits in general were plummeting. The center responded by reaching out to more Bay Area firms, a strategy that Selbin said “wasn't necessarily visionary as much as a response to necessity.”

“I don't think it was rocket science,” he said.

What seemed at first like a quick fix, however, soon developed into a long-term strategy.

EBCLC hired a Boalt graduate to devise a fundraising strategy that better incorporated Bay Area law firms, and brought more big-firm partners into the fold on its leadership team.

The result: EBCLC has tripled the amount of direct contributions coming in from law firms over the past five years. For 2006, that figure stands at about \$150,000.

Individual donations have gone up almost as much. And in the last several years, EBCLC has also added several hundred thousand dollars to its coffers in the form of *cy pres* distributions, funds left over from class action judgments that attorneys can di-

rect to charitable organizations.

During the same five years, EBCLC has quadrupled the number of volunteer attorneys who work with its clients, allowing the clinic to beef up the level of service it can offer for tenants fighting evictions, homeless families applying for welfare assistance, and other needy clients.

“That was a very concerted effort on our part to tighten our relationship with the law firms, both on the philanthropic side [and] also on the pro bono side,” Selbin said.

In January, Selbin is taking a full-time position on the faculty at Boalt Hall, where he has been teaching a poverty law seminar for years. EBCLC is running a national search to find its next leader.

Selbin's move to Boalt is seen by some alumni as another sign of the EBCLC's burgeoning influence in the legal community.

The center's founders will recall that the Boalt administration was slow to lend a hand while its students struggled in the late '80s to get things up and running.

“I would say there was a certain amount of skepticism about whether we could really pull it off,” said Janet Helson, one of the founders, who now practices family law in Seattle.

“It took some time to convince [Boalt] that we should be funded,” added Michael Loeb, a JAMS mediator and chair of the center's board of directors.

More recently, the clinic inked a new af-

filiation agreement with Boalt that will provide the center about 20 percent of its annual funding, the most Boalt has ever agreed to contribute. Selbin and Stephen Sugarman, associate dean at Boalt Hall and a longtime EBCLC board member, both pushed for the agreement.

But Selbin, who will continue working with EBCLC as faculty director, does note that the center's growth will present some difficulties for the next director to contend with. (Deputy director Deborah Moss-West will serve as interim executive director after Selbin leaves in January.)

“One of our great strengths has been our open storefront office as a community asset. I think a challenge is going to be maintaining that same spirit in our new space,” Selbin said.

Early this month, EBCLC staff and supporters honored their departing director at Cafe de la Paz, a mid-priced restaurant popular with Berkeley's vegetarian crowd.

Loeb said the venue — Selbin's choice — was appropriate given EBCLC's tendency to shun ritzy hotel ballrooms in favor of places more in line with the clinic's grass-roots cultural appeal.

“Just like Jeff,” Loeb said, “it's somewhat understated.”

*Reporter Matthew Hirsch's e-mail address is mhirsch@alm.com.*