



Bernida Reagan, EBCLC Executive Director, Michael Loeb, Chair of the EBCLC Board of Directors, and Elise Brown, Director of the EBCLC Housing and Economic Development Units.

EAST BAY COMMUNITY LAW CENTER

CELEBRATING TEN YEARS

The idea of the East Bay Community Law Center (EBCLC) began modestly in 1986, over casual conversation and a few brown bag lunches. That fall, a small group of Boalt students began talking to one another about the problems of persistent poverty in nearby communities and sharing their concerns about the population of homeless people living in the Berkeley streets.

"There was just no way in good conscience that we could eat lunch at a cafe on Telegraph Avenue every day, stepping around penniless or homeless people to get there, and not feel some sort of responsibility to do something," says Janet Helson '89, now a public interest attorney in Seattle. "Clearly, there was a crying need for some legal assistance, and it certainly seemed that Boalt and its students were perfectly situated to provide it." As there had already been some discussion among students and faculty about the possibility of expanding clinical offerings at Boalt, the focus of conversation quickly turned to the creation of a new clinical program aimed at providing legal services to the local community. Over the following two years, Boalt students formulated the idea, established relationships with the local community, incorporated Berkeley Community Law Center (BCLC) as an independent nonprofit corporation, and raised all the funds to support its launching. The center opened its doors in September 1988. From the beginning, the need for legal services among low-income people in the community was apparent—in its first six months of operation, EBCLC served over 400 clients. EBCLC's initial focus of student training and services was on issues addressing homelessness. From its inception, however, EBCLC has evolved its services in response to community need.

In 1989, when the Loma Prieta earthquake struck the Bay Area—little more than a year after EBCLC's opening—the center established the Earthquake Legal Assistance Project which provided desperately needed legal services to victims of that natural disaster. In 1990 in response to a deadly epidemic quietly raging through the East Bay low-income community, then Skadden Fellow Jeff Selbin founded the HIV/AIDS Law Project at EBCLC. This project is unique in California with its in-house, direct client advocacy targeted to low-income people with HIV. In 1995 in an effort to assist in the creation and advancement of sustainable local infrastructure and institutions for poor people in the East Bay, staff attorney Elise Brown started EBCLC's first transactional clinic, the Community Economic Development Unit.

With an annual budget exceeding \$900,000, and 14 full-time staff members, EBCLC celebrated its tenth anniversary this fall. EBCLC has a great deal to be thankful for. In less than a decade, EBCLC has grown to become the largest single provider of legal services to low-income people in the East Bay. Since BCLC's founding in 1988, more than 350 law students have provided assistance on over 12,000 legal matters. EBCLC's attorney staff includes five former law student interns: Dan Barba '91, Mark Del Monte '97, Laura Lane '96, Manel Kappagoda (Hastings) and Ann Kneeland (Georgetown)—a National Association for Public Interest Law (NAPIL) Fellow. In recognition of its growth and expanded services—which now include all of Alameda County—on July 1, 1998, the Berkeley Community Law Center officially changed its name to the East Bay Community Law Center.

Today, EBCLC assists low-income clients with approximately 2,000 legal matters a year and delivers outreach services to another 2,000 people. Staffed by nine attorneys and 16–20 law students, the goal of EBCLC is to make legal services available to all, regardless of economic status, language or cultural barriers. EBCLC fulfills this mission in two ways: by providing hands-on educational training to Boalt students and by providing desperately needed legal services to the low-income communities of Berkeley, Oakland and other parts of Alameda County.

EBCLC specializes in the areas of housing, income support, AIDS, and community economic development. In recent years, the center has experienced an unprecedented increase in client requests as social and political changes have caused other agencies to decrease their services.

By working at EBCLC, students gain valuable experience in lawyering skills and legal advocacy. Under the supervision of the center's attorneys, students interview clients, research the relevant law, negotiate with opposing parties and, where appropriate, prepare for and carry out the trial of cases in judicial or administrative settings. Through the Community Law Practice course (CLP), taught by EBCLC staff at Boalt, and the EBCLC clinical program, students learn a broad range of traditional and non-traditional lawyering skills; the theoretical and practical capacities and limitations of lawyers, institutions and the legal system; and the impact of the legal system on poor people.

The course, which fulfills Boalt Hall's professional responsibility requirement, integrates reading, reflection and classroom discussion on the lawyer's role in providing legal services to low-income clients with the students' own actual practice experiences. Together the course and the clinic provide students with the opportunity to learn first-hand about the professional responsibilities of representing clients, including instruction in the ABA's Model Rules of Professional Conduct.

Continuing the tradition of Boalt student involvement in the development and governance of EBCLC, students serve on the EBCLC Student Steering Committee. The steering committee assists in the coordination of the Homeless Outreach Project and the HIV Outreach Program and generally serves as a liaison between EBCLC and students, faculty and staff at Boalt Hall. Several members of the steering committee also serve on EBCLC's Board of Directors.

Says Margot Rosenberg, '89, one of EBCLC's founders, "The Berkeley Community Law Center was born, in large part, in response to the cynicism, greed and increasing inequities which characterized the mid-1980's, the 'Reagan era.' Those involved in the founding of the law center cannot help but be delighted that a decade after boldly converting a boarded-up liquor store into a community law office, the center remains true to its original mission: to provide the highest quality legal services to those low-income clients with the most desperate need, and to train new lawyers to be advocates for the dispossessed. The law center is now an integral, well-respected and trusted community institution."

EBCLC's board and staff are proud of the excellent learning opportunities and legal representation they have provided over the last decade and look forward to the challenges of the future. ☼

For information on how you can support EBCLC, please call Executive Director, Bernida Reagan, at (510) 549-4040.