

SOLO

NEVER ALONE

Hamid Yazdan Panah

This past fall, The Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF), in partnership with the Justice & Diversity Center (JDC) and the Lawyer Referral and Information Service, started the Community Law Practice Incubator (CLPI). CLPI began as an initiative of 2016 BASF President Michael Tubach, O'Melveny & Myers. Thanks to 2013 President Chris Kearney, Kecker, Van Nest & Peters, generous seed funding was provided for the incubator. In addition to Chris Kearney's contribution, funding was provided by Michael Tubach, O'Melveny & Meyers, and several partners from the O'Melveny firm. Off to a great start, the incubator completed its first half term of operations in March 2017.

The focus of CLPI has been to provide guidance and support for attorneys with a passion for community service and the ambition to start a solo practice. The program started its inaugural class with four participants, each with their own unique backgrounds, diverse career paths, and a strong commitment to serving the legal needs of their community. Participants not only completed a rigorous boot camp to launch their solo practice but also participated in weekly meetings and CLE seminars to sharpen their practice skills. Although the essence of building a solo practice is self-sufficiency, the philosophy of CLPI has been, "Go solo, but

not alone," and to this end the incubator has sought to foster a sense of community and cooperation. This includes providing a space for mentors and participants to communicate and share ideas about law practice management, legal strategies, and business philosophy. It also provides a sense of stability for participants in times of uncertainty and solitude.

Christina Sava, a CLPI participant, found that the incubator's guidance helped her build a practice she felt comfortable with. "Thanks to the facilitators at BASF and the generous solo and small firm attorneys that came to talk with us, I now feel confident in operating my own practice, my own way."

In addition to juggling all of the administrative tasks and legal know-how required to start their solo careers, participants also worked directly with pro bono and low-income clients through the incubator's referral program. In their work with clients, participants put theory into practice and learned what life as a solo attorney is actually like.

Participants' practical experiences included dealing with problematic clients, receiving guidance from mentors and colleagues, and ultimately serving vulnerable populations who needed legal assistance. "I graduated from law school not really knowing what it took to start a law firm. Through the incubator, I found out that it was not that hard and

COMMUNITY LAW PRACTICE INCUBATOR



photo by Jim Block

Front, from left, CLPI participants Jason Yee and Jubilee Menzies, and Chris Kearney, 2013 BASF president; back, from left, Michael Tubach, 2016 BASF president, and Nick Goldman, CLPI participant

it was exactly what I wanted to do,” said Jason Yee, a UC Hastings College of the Law graduate with an interest in immigration and business law.

As CLPI approaches the second half of its first year, it not only is set to take on additional participants but has decided to expand its practice areas to include immigration law. This provides participants with an additional area of law to explore and also addresses the overwhelming demand for immigration attorneys within the local community.

The demand for affordable legal services in the Bay Area remains an important community issue, and there is a significant need to foster private practices that are able to take on low-fee clients who are unable to find representation at a nonprofit. As the practice of law changes and the need for affordable legal services grows in the Bay Area, CLPI

serves as an important hub to foster a sense of community and collaboration.

For Nick Goldman, a CLPI participant who focuses on landlord-tenant issues, community remains a key ingredient to success as a solo. “No person achieves success on their own. There is only one name on a solo practitioner’s stationery, but it takes a group to make it a success.”

Hamid Yazdan Panah is an attorney and the Community Law Practice Incubator coordinator. To learn more, contact him at hpanah@sfbar.org or visit www.sfbar.org/clpi.

Read the incubator participants’ profiles on the following pages.

NICK GOLDMAN

Landlord-Tenant Law

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Nick Goldman has been many things over the course of his life—veteran, realtor, paralegal, and now solo attorney. His past experiences have not only taught Nick valuable lessons but have all seemingly come together to prepare him for life as a solo.

After graduating as valedictorian of his law school class, Nick decided to embark on a solo career and focus his practice in an area that combines his passion, past experience, and community needs: landlord-tenant law. “I wanted to combine my love of real estate and my love of the law.” Previously, Nick had volunteered at the Housing Rights Committee in San Francisco, experiencing first-hand how important an issue housing is in San Francisco.

Nick’s experiences have granted him access to a steady stream of referrals from former clients and connections, and his past work with landowners and tenants provides him with a balanced perspective in a contentious area of the law.

Although he looks every part the seasoned attorney, going out on his own was just as daunting for Nick as for anyone else. “I knew that I wanted to set up my own solo practice, but I was unsure of how to do it. On the larger scale, my concern was whether the idea was feasible at all. Was the idea of going solo a folly or could it really be done? How could I make it happen on my own?”

For Nick, CLPI provided a stable platform to transition from law school to actually using the law on a day-to-day basis. The guidance of BASF and the support of JDC helped Nick become “bona fide” as he calls it. “Being solo does not mean that one has to go it alone. I now know that it is entirely possible for an attorney to get out of school and hang out their shingle. And that there are many seasoned attorneys who are willing to help with that process.”

And far from being alone, Nick has utilized a multitude of resources within the CLPI program to jumpstart his first year. “First came the boot camp, during which we met and spoke with solo practitioners from different backgrounds and specialties who all carried the same message: that going solo is not only possible but very rewarding on many different levels. I’ve found this to be the case in my own practice.”

As he completes his first year of solo practice, Nick hopes to build a trusted name among his clients and develop a practice that is both sustainable and community oriented.

“Looking forward, I see myself as a trusted advisor to a select group of repeat clients. With the procedures and resources that I have learned in CLPI, I know that this goal can be reached.”



JUBILEE MENZIES

Elder Law

Most solo attorneys don't start out with a specific niche, but most solo attorneys aren't Jubilee Menzies. A graduate of Boston College Law School, Jubilee spent six years practicing antitrust, consumer protection, and class action litigation in San Francisco before deciding to go solo.

"A lot of these large class action cases provided the opportunity to craft interesting legal arguments or learn about the business practices in a given industry, but you never actually sat down face to face with a client. Prior to law school, I worked with people every day, face to face, constantly interacting and solving dynamic problems; and I found that I missed that."

Having real clients was important to Jubilee, so she sought out pro bono opportunities through the Justice & Diversity Center (JDC) and other avenues.

One pro bono case that pointed Jubilee in a new career direction came when a family had moved their elderly, blind mother into a continuing care community in a different state. Several months in, a bedbug infestation was discovered and the facility began evicting residents. When Jubilee stepped in, the facility was refusing to work with the out-of-state family or provide additional time to find

suitable housing and was actively pressuring the woman to take her belongings to a hotel within a week.

"In that one case, I researched so many different topics from housing to health care to disability rights. I was shocked by the facility's treatment of this woman and her family and saw the world open up for them just because an attorney had gotten involved." The case resolved favorably prior to litigation, and it left an impression on Jubilee.

"I recognized an entire population of underserved elders in our society and saw an opportunity for me to get back into working with community members on a one-on-one basis, so I decided to become an elder law attorney."

As Jubilee launched her new solo practice, she joined CLPI to access the direct mentorship available because "the greatest challenge I have found has been knowing which steps I need to take in order to establish a sustainable business."

As she moves forward, Jubilee remains committed to bringing to bear everything she learned from complex litigation, to community organizing, to teaching in establishing a holistic practice that is focused on clients and their access to justice.

CHRISTINA SAVA

Cannabis and Business Law
www.mcdlawyer.com



Christina Sava is not your typical attorney. She has an ace up her sleeve. Or in her mind. Christina practices mindfulness meditation as a means to handle the day-to-day stress of her practice and a busy urban lifestyle. She also teaches mindfulness to other attorneys, in hopes that they may find the same benefits that she does. “The hallmarks of a mindfulness practice are empathy and equanimity, and a lawyer with a mindfulness practice is best equipped to meet the client’s legal and emotional needs.”

Christina, a 2014 graduate of the University of Miami (UM) School of Law, apprenticed under Scott Rogers, the director of the university’s Mindfulness in Law program. Christina brought these experiences and her passion for community-oriented legal work to the CLPI program.

“There is a growing need for attorneys to explore the tools offered by mindfulness meditation for their own sake, for the sake of their clients, and for the sake of the legal profession as a whole. As a participant in CLPI, I had a chance to put mindfulness practices and principles to the test in a community law practice setting.”

Christina’s own past experiences as an assistant to a successful solo attorney have motivated her to pursue a solo path. She is committed to social justice and diversity and hopes to use

her solo practice to help ameliorate the current crisis of lack of accessibility to much needed legal services.

“I want to be a solo practitioner so that I can offer the most attuned, empathetic, and encouraging representation possible for my clients. I deeply appreciate the interpersonal aspect of legal representation—the human connection formed between attorney and client. I want to help create a culture of practice that assures clients that the justice system can work for them.”

But the path to solo nirvana isn’t easy. In her quest to create a practice that not only focuses on community needs and sustainability but also seeks to promote empathy and awareness, Christina has found solace in community and cooperation.

“Although I am interested in solo practice, I still believe in the power of joining forces and sharing, and I would like to share my own experience with the community of colleagues I connect with through the incubator.”

Christina is the managing attorney at the Law Offices of James Anthony and is using the solo practice she started at CLPI to continue to help low-income clients through the JDC and LRIS low-fee referral system.



JASON YEE

Immigration and Business Law
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Jason Yee is a man on a mission. You may see him in the halls of BASE, at the immigration court, or at a community naturalization event, combining old-fashioned hard work with new age efficiency. Jason, a graduate of UC Hastings College of the Law, has jumped into solo life with fervor, and has brought his own brand of entrepreneurial energy to the legal world. Before starting his own practice, Jason played a role in every aspect of his family business, including marketing, accounting, sales, legal, and other essential operations in the company. “The things I have learned in my family business are directly transferable to running a successful law practice.”

After spending some time serving as general counsel to his family business, Jason contemplated his future while taking on pro bono cases at JDC and other local nonprofits. He decided that a solo career would provide him the type of flexibility and independence he craved.

Jason has found that CLPI offered him the stability and guidance to get through the rough first year of practice. Not only did the program help him sort out the nuts and bolts of his practice, but it provided him with clients and cases to keep him busy during his launch period. The program also provided him with valuable resources and an operational structure.

“If I just started my own solo practice, it would be much more difficult to manage both paying for events and trainings and volunteering at pro bono clinics. By participating in the incubator, I have access to an array of resources and contacts while being within a program that allows me to give back to my own community.”

Jason has focused his practice primarily on immigration and business law but has also taken on cases involving bankruptcy, landlord-tenant, and family law. Through his contacts in the community and his drive to expand his network, Jason has increased his caseload and built a practice that he hopes to expand. As the need for immigration representation increases in the community, Jason hopes to grow professionally into a position where he is able to address the needs of the community.

Now more than halfway through the incubator’s first year, Jason is bullish about his future prospects and how things are shaping up. “I successfully launched my solo practice last year. I have paying clients, pro bono clients, an office, a website, mentors, referrals from other attorneys, advertisements, and a variety of other things. There’s still a lot to do, but it has been extremely fulfilling.”