

Three Years Make 20: LIFT Assists 20 New Attorneys to Date

By Amy E. Duncan

In its third year of operation, the Louisiana State Bar Association's Legal Innovators for Tomorrow (LIFT) Incubator and Accelerator Program has assisted more than 20 attorneys¹ in building public interest-focused solo practices. Started in April 2014, the program is designed to address two issues: 1) the lack of affordable legal services available to people of modest means and vulnerable Louisiana residents; and 2) the challenging job market for recent law graduates. The program accomplishes this by providing new attorneys with the support, resources and guidance they need to build low bono² practices that serve the unmet legal needs of so many falling into the growing justice gap.

The program operates under two

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LIFT Fellows in the Domestic Violence Project and partners from Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (SLLS) came together at the annual Louisiana Justice Community Conference in October. Front row from left, Laura Tuggle Issokson, SLLS executive director; C. Nicole Gaither, SLLS attorney; Amy E. Duncan, Louisiana State Bar Association Access to Justice training and projects counsel. Back row from left, Coby A. Venable, LIFT Fellow; Warren C. Ehlers, LIFT Fellow; Shawon J. Bernard, LIFT Fellow; Evelyn A. Bryant, SLLS attorney; and Douglas F. Carey, SLLS managing attorney.

Interview / LIFT Incubator Fellow, Nicholas J. Hite

2014 LIFT Fellow Nicholas J. Hite, who participated in the Domestic Violence Project with Southeast Louisiana Legal Services and the New Orleans Family Justice Center, discussed reasons he joined the program and decided to go solo shortly after graduating law school.

I started my legal career as . . . a contract attorney during tough economic times for new law graduates, but knew I wanted to do more in terms of advocacy for people without access to representation due to income or a lack thereof.

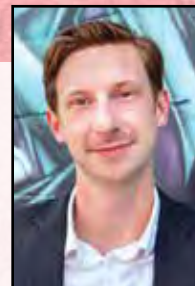
I decided to go solo because . . . I wanted to become a legal advocate and have passion for the people I represent. I heard about the LIFT Incubator program at the same time that I was planning on going solo. It just felt like everything suddenly became clear and the pieces just started falling into place.

My practice mostly focuses on . . . affordable domestic court advocacy especially for LGBTQ and Latina people with an additional focus in accessing civil remedies for adult and child survivors of domestic abuse and sexual assault.

I address the legal needs of those falling into the justice gap by . . . offering services on a sliding scale if I'm charging an hourly rate. But I try to do as much flat-fee billing as possible to make it easier for my clients and for me.

My practice is different because . . . I chose to take a third route, I guess. It's not a standard market-rate firm and it's not a super-restricted, free legal non-profit. Instead I meet my clients where they are financially. My practice is the kind of law firm I would need and want as a client.

The best resources I've received through the incubator program have been . . . two things: office space and colleagues. LIFT literally gave me the space to spread my wings and experiment with my new practice. The incubator also hooked me up with some of the best attorneys around. Those experienced in their fields, total professionals, and just really kind people who have shared countless hours answering my questions, calming my fears, and encouraging me to keep pushing.



Nicholas J. Hite

models — the accelerator and the incubator model. Participants in the 18-month accelerator model receive a number of benefits designed to “accelerate” their low-bono law firm. Under the accelerator model, attorneys receive:

- ▶ training that includes office startup and law practice management, business training and assistance in the areas of accounting, marketing and management for solo practitioners, and procedural and substantive legal training with CLE credits;
- ▶ mentoring from experienced attorneys;
- ▶ networking opportunities with judges and solo practitioners;
- ▶ pro bono case referrals;
- ▶ opportunities to work in the courts and assist self-represented litigants;
- ▶ free case management and legal research database software;
- ▶ access to networks through the Louisiana State Bar Association; and
- ▶ referrals from legal aid programs and partner organizations.

A few participating attorneys have led the way in expanding the type of training and hands-on experience received through the program. Attorney DeVonn H. Jarrett, a 2015 LIFT Accelerator Fellow, led the way in forming a partnership between LIFT and the Entertainment Law Legal Assistance (ELLA) Project. The ELLA Project, operated by Tulane Law School Professor Ashlye M. Keaton, Gene Meneray and the Tipintina's Foundation, provides legal assistance to low-income artists and musicians state-



Professor Ashlye M. Keaton, left, and DeVonn H. Jarrett at the musicians' legal clinic in New Orleans.

wide.

Three LIFT incubator project models have developed through collaborations between LIFT, Legal Services Corporation programs and nonprofit organizations. They include:

▶ **Domestic Violence Project.**

Through a collaboration with the New Orleans Family Justice Center and Southeast Louisiana Legal Services, LIFT Fellows receive office space and work with attorneys in family and domestic violence law to increase access to legal presentation to survivors.

▶ **Immigration Bond Project.** LIFT, in collaboration with the New Orleans Pro Bono Project, provides support and mentorship to LIFT Fellows practicing immigration law.

▶ **Post-Conviction Relief Project.**

The Justice and Accountability Center of Louisiana (JAC) works with LIFT,

in support of its collaborative lawyering initiative, to address legal barriers individuals face after incarceration, including expungement services and civil legal needs of participants in the Re-Entry Court programs.

FOOTNOTES

1. For an overview of the LIFT Incubator and Accelerator Program and a list of participating attorneys, go to: <https://www.lsba.org/LIFT/>.

2. “Low bono is a term that many bar leaders, law faculty and new graduates have heard but may not fully understand. A definition of low bono is not yet in Black’s Law Dictionary but the frequency of its use is increasing in the legal profession. Low bono is used synonymously with the practices of offering reduced legal fees.” Luz E. Herrera, “Encouraging the Development of ‘Low Bono’ Law Practices,” U. M.D. L.J. Race, Relig. Gender & Class 2-3 (2014). Types of reduced rates can include a sliding-fee schedule based on income, flat fees or unbundled legal services. However, the meaning of reduced is typically subjective as viewed from the client’s perspective of what he/she can afford and the lawyer’s perspective of what he/she can charge.

Amy E. Duncan is the Louisiana State Bar Association’s Access to Justice training and projects counsel and directs Legal Innovators for Tomorrow (LIFT), a statewide legal incubator and accelerator program that provides young attorneys with resources to develop innovative, public interest-focused, solo law firms. She received her JD and MBA degrees from Loyola University College of Law. (amy.duncan@lsba.org; 601 St. Charles Ave., New Orleans, LA 70130-3404)



Coming Soon (to Your Inbox)

Louisiana Statewide Pro Bono Survey of Attorneys

The Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) is announcing participation in a new project to gather information about Louisiana’s commitment to pro bono. The LSBA’s Access to Justice Program and Louisiana pro bono projects are partnering with the American Bar Association to distribute a statewide survey to collect valuable information concerning pro bono access throughout the state. Specifically, the survey is designed to assess the state of pro bono in the legal profession, quantify and recognize the pro bono work done by attorneys, and understand the factors that encourage or discourage pro bono service.

The LSBA needs your help and input, whether you’ve volunteered within the last year or not. The survey will be distributed electronically in January 2017. Stay tuned!