Congratulations to our new DAG Fund Fellow: Rebecca Donaldson!

We are thrilled to announce that Rebecca Donaldson, HLS ’16, has been named the DAG Fund fellow for 2017-2018. Rebecca, who just completed a clerkship with the Hon. Virginia M. Kendall in the Northern District of Illinois, already has impressive experience as a women’s rights advocate, having worked with both the National Women’s Law Center and the ACLU on issues including sex discrimination, unfair labor practices, housing, and domestic violence.

Rebecca will use her fellowship to work in her hometown of Milwaukee and partner with Legal Action of Wisconsin where she will lead a pilot project focused on aiding victims of violent sexual crimes. Oftentimes, victims are required by law to provide their mental health records which, if given, can be used to discredit them. If the victim refuses to comply, she cannot testify in her own defense. Rebecca will provide direct civil representation to survivors while helping to build a movement around empowering women.

To learn more about Rebecca’s work, come hear her speak on November 18th at our second annual Fall Fundraiser!

Building a Movement and Launching a Career
First DAG Fellow Makes Waves in Boston

The DAG Fund’s inaugural fellow, Joseph (Joey) Michalakes, has spent the last year as a community lawyer with Greater Boston Legal Services (“GBLS”), where he partnered with community organizations to represent low-income clients in housing and employment matters. With his fellowship now coming to a close, Joey can take pride in achieving major victories for his clients, building a sustainable model for effective change, and earning the trust and admiration of GBLS, which has hired Joey to continue the work he began as a DAG Fellow.

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Victory

On July 28, 2017, longtime City Life-Vida Urbana member and HLAB client, Gerardo Chacon, won his nearly five year-long battle against Everbank to save his home! Mr. Chacon won his case on appeal after losing at the trial court level in 2015. Although he has been living in his home during the entire court case, Mr. Chacon’s win means that the foreclosure is voided, he is declared the legal owner of his home, and he is no longer at risk of eviction.

Mr. Chacon bought his East Boston triple-decker home in 2004 through a mortgage from Everbank that was insured by HUD. Around 2008, Mr. Chacon fell behind in his mortgage payments when events in his home country, El Salvador, caused him to incur significant financial expense to support his family there. But because HUD insured his mortgage, Everbank was required to engage Mr. Chacon in negotiations to modify his loan once he fell behind. It never did so, and instead chose to foreclose on Mr. Chacon’s home in 2012.

Thanks to the sword-and-shield model Dave and others at HLAB and City Life-Vida Urbana developed, this was not the end for Mr. Chacon. Shortly after the foreclosure, Mr. Chacon got connected with City Life-Vida Urbana and fought in the streets against Everbank’s and other banks’ unfair and illegal policies. Then, when Everbank brought Mr. Chacon to court to evict him, Dave and his colleagues and students at HLAB represented him through years of litigation. They successfully convinced the Boston Housing Court judge to rule that Everbank had violated HUD regulations and should have engaged Mr. Chacon in negotiations to modify his loan. However, the Housing Court judge ultimately ruled in Everbank’s favor on technical grounds.

Mr. Chacon appealed this ruling, with representation provided by colleagues of Dave’s at the National Consumer Law Center. When Mr. Chacon learned of the Appeals Court win in July, he said of his lawyers at HLAB and NCLC, “I’ve never been as grateful to anyone as I am to all of you.”

Building a Movement and Launching a Career

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Joey designed his fellowship around working with community organizations like City Life/Vida Urbana (CLVU) and the Chelsea Collaborative to broaden his impact and empower his clients. In only one year, these partnerships have already yielded impressive results. To take one example, in late 2016 dozens of tenants in the Dorchester and Mattapan faced displacement after their landlord filed for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy, resulting in a court-ordered sale of the buildings where their long time homes were located. Joey played an integral role on the team of GBLS advocates, CLVU organizers and community members, public officials from the City of Boston, and pro bono counsel from Jones Day, Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman, and Goulston & Storrs, that pressured the Bankruptcy Trustee to sell the buildings to a nonprofit that agreed to buy and refurbish the properties while keeping them affordable for at least 50 years. This intervention, which was ratified by the Bankruptcy Court, saved dozens of low-income housing units and represented a major victory for the law and organizing model that David Grossman championed and Joey carried forward through his fellowship.

Toward the end of his fellowship, Joey saw firsthand how his work had created ripples throughout the community. One of Joey’s early clients, “Hilda,” later became an organizer herself so she could “carry it forward” and help build City Life’s economic justice movement. In that spirit, Joey and Hilda organized a training to educate tenants about their legal rights. When only one tenant showed up to their training, the lone attendee suggested that Joey and the organizer come back to the tenant’s apartment to speak with the other tenants. They did so, and Joey watched as Hilda – who herself faces no-fault eviction from her home in East Boston of over 20 years – led an impromptu know-your-rights training for half the tenants in the building. Joey is confident that many of the tenants trained will one day, like Hilda, become organizers themselves, thereby contributing to a powerful and self-sustaining movement for economic justice.

Reflecting on his fellowship, Joey is proud of the innovative community lawyering model he pursued, and of the results it yielded for his clients and their communities. He is grateful for the DAG Fund for helping to launch his public interest career, and is excited to continue his vital work as an attorney with GBLS.

David Grossman’s Longtime Client Finds Victory in Court!

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