By Rachel Schwartz and Timna Axel

In October last year, an old Masonic temple building in Uptown, leaking heat
from a broken boiler and partially restricted because of asbestos, was sold for almost $2 million to a developer with plans to gut the building and fill it with condos.

But not everyone was ready to leave.

For 64 years, the old marble building had been home to the American Indian Center (AIC), a community space for tens of thousands of Native Americans and their descendants who'd been forcibly relocated from reservations scattered around the country.
Les Begay, Chairman of the AIC’s Board of Directors
When community members founded the AIC in 1953, “It gave them a place where they felt—a safe place really—where they could go and be with other Native people and feel like they were still part of a community,” explains Les Begay, a member of the Diné (Navajo) tribe and Chairman of the AIC’s Board of Directors. Since its founding, thousands of Native Americans representing about 80 different tribes have participated in the AIC’s food and clothing banks, health clinics, pow wows, archery lessons, beading classes and storytelling nights.

“A lot of people grew up at the Center,” explains Begay. “People talk about when they were small children they met some of their best friends, they met their husband or wife there, so it’s difficult for them to say goodbye.”

Yet by 2014 the once-pristine building, which was donated to the American Indian Center more than 50 years ago, was crumbling around them. The two top floors were blocked off due to asbestos. In the winter, staff used blowers to stay warm and heated water in their industrial kitchen.
As it became clear that the costs of keeping their Uptown building operational would soon reach astronomical heights, AIC applied for a spot at Clinic in a Box™, a program run by Corporate Pro Bono, in conjunction with the Chicago Chapter of the Association of Corporate Counsel, DLA Piper and the Community Law Project of Chicago Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights.

At Clinic in a Box™, nonprofits in need of transactional legal assistance are paired with pro bono attorneys who assess their needs and begin working on a range of issues. The Community Law Project works to recruit and screen participating nonprofits and to coordinate their on-going legal assistance with
pro bono counsel. When they arrived at DLA Piper for the clinic in July of 2014, the AIC staff was paired with two real estate attorneys and a corporate attorney who would soon play a major role shaping the organization’s future: Marjorie Zessar, Katie Donnelly and Kristi Hayek.

The Community Law Project of Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights helps to build, strengthen, and support community-based organizations, small businesses, and homeowners in Chicago's low-income neighborhoods. Learn more here.