

# TOWARD JUSTICE

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## Legal Aid Responds to Tornado Aftermath

On May 22, 2011, a tornado hit North Minneapolis, cutting a three-block swath through a neighborhood already heavily affected by the foreclosure crisis. By May 24, Legal Aid had staffed emergency and disaster relief clinics throughout the area. In the following week, attorneys were on hand every day, providing legal education on tenants' rights, security deposits, public assistance, and referral information for a number of services and resources.

Legal Aid established a special intake line for post-tornado calls. Drew Schaffer, an attorney in the housing unit, stepped into a leadership role, both on the ground in the affected neighborhoods and back at the office where he handled all tornado-related calls. "A large number of my clients live in the neighborhoods most affected by the tornado," says Drew. "Seeing the effects of the storm on the physical and social environments of those neighborhoods has profoundly affected me, and I have a special admiration for the spirit and strength

of the North Minneapolis community in the aftermath of the storm. I enjoy nothing more than working with my clients to find solutions to difficult problems, and I truly appreciate the time I have spent in North Minneapolis helping storm-affected tenants improve their housing situations."

One client had a water leakage problem in the basement and a mold problem before the storm. The space was practically unlivable, and the rent was too high for the small space. Then the tornado hit, damaging the roof and exacerbating the water problem in the basement. The family paid to stay in a hotel for the week after the storm, and the landlord did not respond to the client's calls. The landlord's collection agent came in early June to collect the rent and when the client didn't pay, the landlord served notice to pay or move, filing an eviction notice the next day. Drew represented the family and negotiated for a mutual lease termination with no June rent obligation. The agreement also provided for dismissal and expungement of

Continued from page 1.

the eviction case, preserving the family's rental history. The client and her family moved into a new home in July.

Legal Aid helped clients negotiate with landlords for necessary repairs, and provided full representation in eviction cases that originated from disputes following the storms. All of these cases were either settled or decided in court in the clients' favor, with each resolution allowing for an expungement to erase the eviction case from the client's rental record to help with future housing searches. "I have faced one landlord in housing court three times over disputes on three different rental properties," says Drew. "It's gotten so he is not so happy to see me."

In addition to working with individuals, Legal Aid staff and volunteers knocked door-to-door in the storm area, handing out more than 450 packets with fact sheets and legal information for storm victims. After this initial outreach effort, Drew received a list of over 1,200 storm-damaged rental properties from the City of Minneapolis, and Legal Aid distributed information about tornado relief and legal resources to every address on that list by mailings and door-knocking. Drew became a constant presence in North Minneapolis, disseminating contacts and resources and attending neighborhood meetings, advice clinics and public forums. He coordinated a referral pipeline with Volunteer Lawyers Network, directing tenants with security deposit issues and homeowners with contract, insurance and mortgage cases to private volunteer attorneys.

The Legal Aid Society of Minneapolis is grateful to the Robins, Kaplan, Miller and Ciresi LLP Foundation for Children, a supporting organization of The Minneapolis Foundation, for its support of our work to assist North Minneapolis tornado victims.

## Lee Mitau

# Commitment to Justice



Lee Mitau, General Counsel at U.S. Bank for the past sixteen years, has been a generous and consistent donor to The Fund for the Legal Aid Society's One Hour of Sharing Campaign. He and his wife Karin Birkeland are quietly philanthropic in many areas, but Legal Aid holds a special place on their list.

"It can be difficult for in-house lawyers, particularly at the senior level, to satisfy our obligation to the legal profession," says Lee. Although U.S. Bank's legal department has a strong pro bono program and the company supports volunteerism of all kinds, Lee finds it difficult to invest the necessary time not only to directly represent people but to stay abreast of the skills needed to represent them well. "In my case, I feel I can best remedy the realities of my schedule by generously supporting attorneys who do the work every day and do it well."

**"It is in our business interest to address systemic problems that threaten the vibrancy and health of the community. Corporate success is closely tied into the economic and social well-being of the community."**

**—Lee Mitau**

As a lifelong resident of the area, Lee has a strong personal interest in the local impact of Legal Aid's work, and his commitment fits nicely with U.S. Bank's corporate culture of volunteerism. "It's not just altruism," he says. "It is in our business interest to address systemic problems that threaten the vibrancy and health of the community. Corporate success is closely tied into the economic and social well-being of the community."

U.S. Bank has been an underwriter of Legal Aid's annual Law Day Dinner for the past three years, and CEO Richard Davis served as keynote speaker in 2009. Lee says U.S. Bank's corporate commitment grew from the efforts of one employee, Andrea Kaufman, who served on The Fund for Legal Aid Board while at U.S. Bank. "We encourage our employees to be active and engaged in the community and to participate on boards of charitable organizations," says Lee. "So when an employee has a passion for the work of an organization like Legal Aid, we want to support that however we can."

## LANE FELLOW PROFILE

# Lindsey Hanson



Lindsey Hanson joined our Willmar office on September 19 as the first Lane Fellow. The Jerry Lane Fellowship was established in the spring of 2011 to provide an opportunity for young lawyers embarking upon a legal career to advocate for low-income individuals and families, seniors and persons with disabilities.

Lindsey first developed an interest in advocacy in high school, while volunteering at a juvenile detention center. Before law school, she worked for the Folwell Center for Urban Initiatives in North Minneapolis and the Myasthenia Gravis Foundation of America in St. Paul. She saw law as a good way to address practical problems, as well as the structural barriers that keep people in poverty. "I believe that low income clients are entitled to high quality legal services," she says, "and I understand how, particularly for low income people, one legal problem can quickly snowball into another and become crippling."

Lindsey graduated from St. Thomas Law School in 2010. For the past year, she has worked with Anishinabe Legal Services, advising and representing clients on the White Earth Reservation on a wide range of issues. She has a great deal of hearing and trial experience.

"The Lane Fellowship provides an amazing opportunity to continue my work in legal aid, and this experience will provide me with more training and skills to effectively serve low-income clients throughout my career."



## New Mpls Deputy Director

Greg Marita started legal services work immediately after graduating from University of Minnesota Law School. Having worked and volunteered with a variety of vulnerable populations through college, he knew that poverty law was the direction he wanted to go. After twenty years in legal services, he accepted the position of Deputy Director of Legal Aid in Minneapolis in February 2011.

Greg remembers one client in particular, an elderly woman who was accused of stealing on the job and denied unemployment compensation. Legal Aid won the case and she got the benefits, but she told Greg that the most important part was to have her record cleared. "That is what makes this work special," says Greg. "Our clients' situations are so vulnerable that getting a good result is very important. But when we do our work well, we also give them access and a voice that otherwise goes unheard. That not only benefits the client, but serves as a forceful reminder that our justice system must listen to those voices if it is going to work for us all."

For Greg, one of the prime benefits of working for Legal Aid, both as a staff attorney and in management, is the opportunity to work with good and thoughtful people. "My coworkers bring a value and mission not only to their work but to their lives," says Greg. "It's a terrific motivator to work hard on the viability of Legal Aid's structure, not only for today but as a bridge to the years to come."

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## Andrea Kaufman Introduction

Andrea Kaufman, the new Director of Development for Legal Aid, has a long history with the program as a volunteer. She served on the board of The Fund for the Legal Aid Society from 1993 until 2011, including a term as Board Chair from 2008-2010, and four years as Leaders in Giving Chair. "In my new role, I hope not only to deepen our support from consistent donors but to broaden our donor base throughout the state," says Andrea.

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For more information or to make an online donation please visit us at [www.mylegalaid.org](http://www.mylegalaid.org).**



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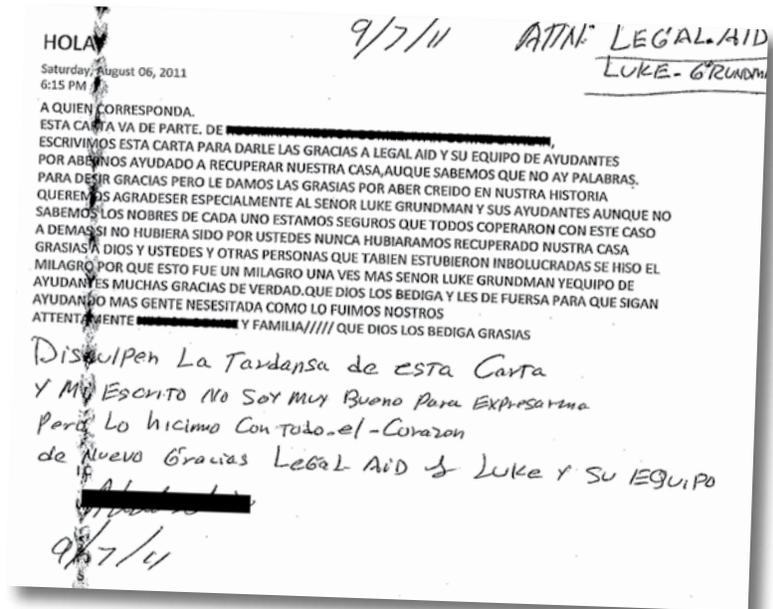
# Mortgage Rescue Project

## Keeping Families in their Homes

A Minneapolis couple was on the verge of saving their home from foreclosure through negotiations with their bank, when an unscrupulous real estate agent, who claimed he worked for their bank, talked them into turning over their house in a cash-for-keys offer. The couple was referred to Legal Aid attorney Luke Grundman and the Mortgage Rescue Project. Luke filed a lawsuit against the deceptive agent, the company he worked for and the new buyer of the home. The case settled, with money from the agent and a loan modification from the clients' bank. The couple is now back in their home with a fixed 30-year mortgage that has payments of one-fifth the amount of their previous monthly payments.

The Mortgage Rescue Project receives national and local funding from public and private sources. The project provides legal advice, representation, community education and policy advocacy to help homeowners keep their homes, avoid real estate scams and recover their investments.

The federal government's Home Affordable Modification Program is designed to help homeowners who are experiencing financial hardship to obtain an affordable loan modification and avoid foreclosure. A number of scams have taken advantage of the Program, taking money from those who can least afford it and providing nothing in return. As bank financing tightens, contract-for-deed cases and rent-to-own cases are also on the rise, often targeted at communities of color. In some cases, landlords demand that their tenants sign a contract for deed with significant down payments. If the client signs the contract, the landlord is released from repair obligations. Many of these contracts are designed for failure, with inflated home values, interest-only deals and impossible balloon payments. Tenants often make emotional and financial



**“We write this letter to give thanks to Legal Aid and its team of assistants for having helped us recoup our house even though we know there aren’t enough words to show how much we thank you. We give you thanks for having believed in our story...”**

investments, believing they have achieved the dream of homeownership, only to end up in foreclosure and eviction situations.

Legal Aid attorney Colleen Daly says, “People who truly can afford their homes should stay in their homes. It’s better for them, for the community, for the banks and for the neighborhoods.”