

# American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division *The Affiliate*

## **Affiliate Leader Spotlight: Melissa Gertz**

*By Jill M. Kastner*

The difference between a true leader and everyone else is that when the rest of us see a problem, we think: “Someone really should do something about that.” When a true leader sees a problem, she springs into action to create a solution.

Melissa Gertz of New Jersey has proven herself to be a true leader. Even before graduating Rutgers School of Law–Newark, Melissa devoted herself to serving the poor and disabled in her community. After graduation from law school, Melissa worked as a staff attorney at the Community Health Law Project (CHLP) in New Jersey, representing indigent, disabled people in a variety of civil matters.

Although Melissa helped many people as part of CHLP, she found that she was unable to help her disabled veteran clients get veterans’ benefits. “Every time the issue came up,” Melissa said, “there was no one who could help them.” Melissa tried to find a group in New Jersey that could help disabled veterans obtain Veteran’s Administration (VA) benefits. Unfortunately, no one did this type of work.

“That’s when I decided to start my own nonprofit,” Melissa said. To fill this urgent need, she set out to establish the Community Justice Center (CJC)—“the only nonprofit in New Jersey that could represent veterans to get their Social Security benefits and benefits from the VA.”

### **Starting a Nonprofit to Help Disabled Veterans**

In March 2009, Melissa’s hard work paid off as CJC opened its doors and began serving the disabled and veterans in New Jersey. Melissa and two other attorneys (one works part-time), now serve nearly 150 clients.

Creating a new nonprofit legal services entity is no easy task. “Funding was very difficult, particularly because of the economy,” Melissa remembered. At the time Melissa was ready to set up her nonprofit, state budget problems caused many legal service providers to lay off attorneys. “Many foundations were not taking new proposals . . . and many private funding sources dried up with the recession.”

Eventually, CJC was able to get limited funding through foundation grants, private donations, and fees generated from cases. The CJC also can get reimbursed from the State of New Jersey if it prevails in obtaining benefits from the Social Security Administration (which allows the state to recoup certain past welfare payments).

Melissa also had to learn new skills in her role as an entrepreneur and executive director of a legal service provider. “I don’t have a business background . . . so I had to learn a lot of things along the way,” said Melissa. “I had to learn how to become a state vendor . . .” and “get the necessary training” to be “accredited by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of General Counsel and admitted to appear in VA courts.” She wrote about these challenges in the January 2010 issue of *The Young Lawyer*: Melissa A. Gertz, *From Aspiring to Inspiring*, *The Young Lawyer* 1 (Jan. 2010), available at [www.abanet.org/yld/tyl/jan10/aspiring.shtml](http://www.abanet.org/yld/tyl/jan10/aspiring.shtml).

“Our typical clients are disabled veterans who are homeless or on the verge of homelessness,” Melissa explained. “They often need a wide variety of services . . . from benefits to housing.” Representing these clients can be particularly challenging because many do not have telephones or even an address for mailing.

### **A True Passion for Helping the Disabled**

Melissa feels a special connection with many of her clients. In 2004, Melissa was nearly killed in a serious car accident. The accident left her disabled and suffering from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many of her clients likewise suffer from TBI and PTSD. “Clients are more willing to open up to me because I understand it,” said Melissa.

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Since opening its door, CJC has seen hundreds of indigent veterans and disabled individuals in need of legal representation. With the help of volunteers from Rutgers School of Law, Columbia Law School, and others, CJC provides a wide range of services to its clients. CJC also remains the only free legal service provider in New Jersey accredited for Veteran's Court.

Melissa hopes to expand CJC in the coming year. If she is able to obtain more funding, she plans to hire additional personnel so that CJC can help even more veterans and disabled individuals in New Jersey.

### **Other Awards and Recognition**

On May 19, 2010, the Young Lawyers Division of the New Jersey State Bar Association recognized Melissa at its Annual Meeting and Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where she was awarded the Service to the Community Award. Melissa is also a recipient of the Equal Justice America Legal Services Fellowship, the Haywood Burns Fellowship, the Charles J. Stamler Award, the Eli Jarmel Memorial Prize, and the Eric Neisser Public Interest Program's Pro Bono Award.

Melissa is a truly inspirational leader who saw a great need to help disabled veterans in her community and has worked tirelessly to fill that need. When creating CJC, Melissa found that the need not only existed in New Jersey, but elsewhere around the country as well. She hopes that true leaders in other states will take up the cause to help protect our nation's disabled veterans.

Learn more about CJC at <http://nj-communityjusticecenter.org>.

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