

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

Volume 158, No. 30

Similar beliefs unite lawyers

Four John Marshall alumnae form pro bono group to help those underserved

BY BETHANY KRAJELIS
Law Bulletin staff writer

If it weren't for law school, the founders of Street Justice Inc. probably wouldn't know each other.

But if they didn't share the same beliefs about the legal system, the four alumnae of The John Marshall Law School said they never would have formed their Chicago-based pro bono group.

Like its motto says, Street Justice has been "taking the law to the streets" since 2009 by bringing legal advice and educational outreach to many of the city's underserved communities.

"Everyone is always talking about the disparities in the system, but no one does anything," said Africa, one of the group's four founders. "We were all on the same page. We wanted to do something about it and that's what we are doing with Street Justice."

Africa, who works as chief of staff to Cook County Commissioner Earlean Collins, graduated from John Marshall in 2004, alongside fellow Street Justice founders Celona D. Hayes, Angela Lockett and Donna L. Otis. They started their pro bono group five years later.

From 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on the third Saturday of each month, the four women travel to different communities to provide free legal services and occasionally give educational presentations on a variety of legal matters. They go to churches, community centers and anywhere else they get requested.

They said the most common question they get during Street Justice outings deals with criminal records expungements. The majority of the people who seek the group's help, however, just need

help navigating what they perceive to be as an unfamiliar, unfair and scary system, they said.

Although all four women come from different backgrounds, they said they joined the law profession for similar reasons, all of which return to their shared beliefs that racial disparities exist in the legal system and that a little help can go a long way.

Bart E. Beals, a criminal defense attorney who does pro bono work for Street Justice, said the need to give back and help correct injustice "is probably the No. 1 thread that binds all of us involved in this group."

"We feel there a lot of injustices out there," he said. "Whether they are intentionally or unintentional, they are there."

He said he does the majority of his pro bono work for Street Justice because it's a group with a mission he believes in.

"They actually put this group together and it exists to help the community," Beals said. "We are just trying to help people out."

Africa, who serves as president of the group, said she went to law school because she "wanted to understand how the world works" and then "save the world."

After earning her law degree in

“Criminal defense can be frustrating. The system is racially biased. I get tired of seeing the same thing over and over.”



(From left to right) Donna L. Otis, Africa, Angela Lockett and Celona D. Hayes, who is not pictured, founded Street Justice Inc., a pro bono group that works to provide free legal services in the city's underserved communities. Heather Eidson

2004, she took a job at the Cook County Bar Association and then eventually started her current gig in county government.

"I like to produce results, whether it's in the law or in politics," she said. "I guess I still want to save the world."

Lockett, who serves as the group's treasurer, grew up in Hanover Park before moving to Oak Park in high school, where she said she was one of a handful of black students.

She said she knew she wanted to be a lawyer in the fourth grade, when her social studies class learned about the civil rights movement during Black History Month.

Up until then, Lockett said, she always felt somewhat embarrassed during Black History Month as one of, if not, the only black student in her class. But once she learned about the civil rights movement and all of the associated legal battles, Lockett said she realized that she "wanted to fight back too."

She handled civil rights cases at the Law Office of Standish E. Willis after law school before taking a break to have her children, during which time she became a solo practitioner. She focuses her practice on criminal law matters.

"Criminal defense can be frustrating," she said. "The system is racially biased. It's so flawed. I get tired of seeing the same thing over and over. That's why I do Street Justice."

Otis, a Street Justice founder, decided to leave her job as a computer consultant to go to law school

after having a personal experience with the legal system.

The Chicago native said she "wasn't happy with my representation and the court's disposition" in her family law matter.

Hayes said she saw disparities at a relatively young age. With a father in the military, Hayes said she "saw so many cultures in so many different countries and I always realized that not everyone has the same privileges."

She focused on sociology in college, but decided she wanted to do more than just study society's behaviors and norms. Hayes said she wanted to and continues to strive to "help the entire person."

"Obviously, I want to help resolve their legal problems, but a lot of times, their legal issues are just a manifestation of something going on in their personal life," she said.

As an attorney at the IRS, Hayes said she offers her tax expertise to those through Street Justice.

Otis, who focuses her practice on probate matters, said the founders of Street Justice utilize their area of expertise and handle a variety of matters.

Otis and Lockett said Street Justice does a lot more than just give free legal help to those in need.

"A lot of minorities don't grow up knowing a lot of lawyers," Lockett said. "I never met a lawyer until law school."

Having four black female lawyers go into minority communities to provide legal assistance "shows them it's possible," Otis said.

bkrajelis@lbp.com