

Ramona Ortega's vision to organize domestic workers in Queens and launch a worker-owned cooperative was met with widespread enthusiasm. "Cooperatives create desperately needed employment alternatives and contribute to the larger workers' rights movement," said Ortega, who founded Cidadao Global (CG), the first Brazilian community-based organization in New York City. "A domestic workers' cooperative owned and operated by immigrant women guards against the pervasive wage and gender exploitation that is all too common in the industry," she added.

"Now that the domestic workers are part of a cooperative, they aren't just going alone into someone's house, and that makes a powerful difference," Ortega said. "Joining together supports them in negotiating wages and hours and provides them with the respect that their work deserves and the dignity of being a small-business owner."

Ortega turned to CUNY Law's Community & Economic Development Clinic (CEDC) to help the women establish their business. "I knew that CUNY Law was the place to assist us in developing the cooperative," she remembered. "The commitment to public interest shows in how the students work with the women." Incorporating a small business and drafting bylaws are not just legal transactions for the CEDC. Instead, students get involved with organizations on a much deeper and more philosophical level.

"We work creatively with nonprofits and cooperatives to help them think through different models of sustainability and structure," said CEDC Director Carmen Huertas-Noble. "The traditional hierarchical and centralized business models typically don't represent our clients' missions, which are based on diffusing and sharing power," she added. As a result, students have the opportunity to help launch organizations that build collective leadership and are structured on alternative ownership and governance models. "Typical corporate structures don't apply neatly to our clients, and a lot of tailoring needs to be done. It's exciting and engaging for our students to work on innovative projects that promote social justice," said Huertas-Noble.

Students work directly with the members of CG, talking through their vision, facilitating their decision making on the legal issues, and capturing those decisions when drafting corresponding legal documents. In addition to CG, CEDC clients include Rehabilitation in Action to Improve Neighborhoods (RAIN), a community land trust on the Lower East Side that provides for sustainable affordable housing, and the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC-U), which fights for improved employment conditions for restaurant workers. In this instance, students have counseled ROC-U on its vision of expanding nationally and are currently drafting an affiliation agreement between ROC-U and its affiliates.

"CEDC clients are advocates against employment abuses, gender exploitation, environmental injustice, and other social injustices. They want to structure their model organizations to reflect their social justice values," Huertas-Noble emphasized. "Students work closely with clients to help them navigate their choices on a number of mission-driven subjects in which other attorneys typically don't engage. We help our clients figure out who will have what kind of power within the organization and how that power will be exercised," she said. "It's very nuanced in that we help organizations institutionalize their values through the legal structures we help create." ●●

COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Turning Vision into Reality

From left: Student Thyra Smith, Cidadao Global Founder Ramona Ortega, Student Maggie Sposato, CEDC Director Carmen Huertas-Noble

