Expanding the CED Practice in NYC
A collaboration between CUNY School of Law and Brooklyn A

By Min Chang

This year, in an effort to further their motto of “Law in the Service of Human Needs”, CUNY School of Law has added the Community and Economic Development Clinic (CEDC), broadening their existing clinical programs. Headed by Professor Carmen Huertas, CEDC builds on the small handful of schools in New York City that currently offer clinical training in this developing area of law. At CUNY, the CEDC is a twelve credit clinic designed to provide students with an in-depth, robust, academic and practical experience. Twice a week, students attend a three-hour seminar covering the nuts and bolts of community and economic development (CED) lawyering that include theories and critiques of CED as a public interest practice. Additionally, students are assigned in-house projects and are placed at an externship. Professor Huertas states that “this collaboration enriches the students’ learning experience by increasing the volume and breadth of the complex transactional matters that students handle. It provides students an opportunity to assume the role of independent lawyer as well as effective collaborator within a fast paced, high volume legal services office.” In addition to the supervision the CEDC students received at their externships, Professor Huertas provided extensive complimentary supervision aimed to help guide reflections on lawyering approaches and the choices made throughout the representation of clients.

Since 1976, Brooklyn A, led by Project Director Marty Needelman and General Counsel Paul Acinapura, has made CED a major program priority. The CED Unit is led by director Jessica Rose with the collaboration of Mr. Acinapura; senior staff attorney Mike Haber; and Equal Justice Works Fellow Nicole Prenovoue (and most recently Rafael Vasquez, a Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP extern). The CED Unit is unique as it is one of the only not-for-profit, neighborhood-based, public interest legal services offices in the country to develop a sustained, substantial practice representing community-based organizations and community development corporations in low-income communities. Through their efforts they have been successful at facilitating the creation of new and rehabilitated housing, the empowerment of tenants, the expansion of health, dental and childcare services, the development of community centers and nursing homes, and the creation of minority and community owned businesses and jobs.

However, despite the efforts and successes of both these organizations, there is still much more to be done. Therefore, by sharing in the rich experiences of the respective organizations, both CUNY and Brooklyn A hope to address these issues and further develop CED practice. To this end, members of the CED Unit taught three seminar classes at CUNY, including a class on negotiating and drafting construction contracts, introducing sustainable/“green” building into CED, and negotiating and drafting commercial leases. Reciprocally, the CEDC sent four students: Ali Najmi, Emily Langdon, Noah Marmar, and myself, Min Chang; to Brooklyn A for a semester-long externship placement.

In the end, it is clear to me the importance of the work that needs to be done and the positive impact CED has on the many families within these communities. As I reflect on my first client meeting, I realize that like the community groups they serve, Brooklyn A and the CEDC are taking innovative steps to do something about the issues that plague these communities...now it is my turn!