

A Free Legal Clinic That Opens When Class Is Over



John Konstantaras/Chicago News Cooperative

Dennis Kass working on a project with students. His foundation offers free legal advice.

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Soon after Dennis Kass started teaching history at a small high school in Little Village four years ago, he put his law degree to use, dispensing free legal advice to students and their families after school. That modest beginning has evolved into the Chicago Law and Education Foundation, a free clinic that has now expanded to eight additional city high schools.

Mr. Kass, 35, estimated that he handled about 100 legal cases last year and said the foundation had helped thousands of people by distributing brochures and answering questions at open houses.

The foundation is based at Mr. Kass's own school, [Infinity Math, Science and Technology High School](#), one of four high schools that are part of the Little Village Lawndale High School campus. The location makes sense, Mr. Kass said, because public schools were an ideal place to provide legal services to low-income families.

Mr. Kass described the foundation's legal work as "triage," and used his fingers to tick off the issues that have come to his attention: "My uncle got arrested, the landlord says we have to move, my mom's boyfriend beat her up, domestic abuse, orders of protection, [immigration](#), homelessness," he said. "Sometimes I have to say there's nothing I can do. Sadly, anything I do is better than what they had."

Many people he worked with did not realize that their problems had legal remedies, Mr. Kass said. "They associate legal problems with being arrested. Half of what we do is telling people what their rights are."

Madilyn Soch, an art teacher at Little Village Lawndale, said five students from her home room had received advice from Mr. Kass this school year. “After these kids have seen Dennis, you can see their relief — physically,” she said. “The work he’s doing transforms lives.”

Cadmiel Avendaño, a 2010 Little Village Lawndale graduate, agreed. Mr. Avendaño, who is now a chemical engineering student at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said his parents had saved enough to buy a house in 2006 but did not realize their mortgage had a variable interest rate. When they fell behind on their payments and the bank threatened foreclosure in 2010, Mr. Kass referred them to an agency that helped with the paperwork for a loan modification.

“My parents never would have known it was possible to do that,” Mr. Avendaño said. “They got a lower interest rate and we were able to stay in our home. If it hadn’t been for the clinic, they would have lost their house and I wouldn’t be in college.”

The foundation runs on a shoestring. The 2011 operating budget was about \$3,000, nearly all of it paid for by the Crossroads Fund, a Chicago foundation that provides small grants to community organizations. The foundation does not receive any money from Chicago Public Schools, according to Mr. Kass and Patricia Brekke, the principal at Infinity. Mr. Kass relies on four volunteer lawyers and Cora Moy, a law student who maintains [the foundation’s bilingual Web site](#), to keep the group running.

Mr. Kass’s short-term goal is to raise \$50,000 to hire a lawyer to direct the organization, allowing him more time to teach, run the clinic at Little Village Lawndale and serve as the faculty adviser for Model United Nations.

Mr. Kass, who grew up on the Northwest Side, said his interest in social justice stemmed from an injury to his pitching arm when he was 7. “I had to move to second base,” he said. “I learned everything I could about the greatest second baseman of all time, Jackie Robinson.”

The story of the man who broke through baseball’s color barrier was more influential to his life, Mr. Kass said, than the situation playing out in his neighborhood, where teenagers armed with pipes would taunt and chase black children who attended the local elementary school. Once an indifferent student, Mr. Kass said he came to appreciate academic life at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He received a master’s degree in education at Michigan and a law degree at DePaul.

“The kids love Dennis as a teacher, even though he pushes them,” said Ms. Soch, the art teacher. “He has the same expectations for all of them, and that earns their respect. He knows what it’s like to deal with gangs, what it’s like to live in an urban environment, so the kids connect to him on that level, too.”

Much of the clinic’s work is referrals. The foundation has partnerships with [DePaul’s Center for Public Interest Law](#), the [Chicago Coalition for the Homeless](#), and [First Defense Legal Aid](#).

“There are organizations and lawyers willing to provide aid to the poor,” Mr. Kass said, “but they don’t have access to each other. This is a way of bringing legal services to where poor people are — in the schools.”

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