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Law School Report

Clinic helps people secure housing, independence

In a run-down section of city street in Niagara Falls, N.Y. — flanked by abandoned homes and across from a shuttered hospital — a dilapidated old dormitory for nurses is getting a new start as transitional housing for homeless women and their children.

The building's rehabilitation is being made possible, in large measure, by the efforts of University at Buffalo law students attracted to an unglamorous, roll-up-your-sleeves niche of law practice known as affordable housing, which focuses on helping nonprofit and community organizations obtain financing to create low-income and special-needs housing.

"Affordable housing is for students looking for more substantial elements of law beyond the flash of litigation," explains law professor George W. Hezel, director of the UB Law School's Affordable Housing Clinic. "These students learn to negotiate sensitive issues, plan and advocate for people, which is really 90 percent of what lawyers do — they don't spend all their time litigating."

The refurbished four-story building, opened in August by the YWCA of Niagara, brings to \$150 million the amount of affordable-housing financing secured by students and faculty members through UB's Affordable Housing Clinic, says Hezel, who has run the clinic for 17 years.

"The trick of this project was securing about \$1 million in historic-preservation tax credits," Hezel explains. "Finding that million paid for amenities that the state Homeless Housing and Assistance Program and Division of Housing were reluctant to pay for. It lessened their burden and made the project doable."

In all, Hezel, clinic co-director Sara Faherty and UB law students secured \$5.6 million in financing for the YWCA project from a mix of tax credits and federal, state and city funding. The 19-unit facility has been named Caroline's House in memory of Niagara Falls



The building site for Cornerstone Manor Transitional Housing facility, a new three-story residence for women who have substance abuse problems, and their children.

lawyer Caroline Van Schaik, killed in a car accident last year, who helped initiate the YWCA project.

In addition to one-, two- and three-bedroom suites, the new facility contains a daycare center and a culinary-arts training center, which prepares women for jobs in restaurants around and in a new casino, located just a few blocks from the facility.

"This is not just housing," says Kathleen Granchelli, executive director of the YWCA of Niagara, who has spearheaded the project. "The most important component is moving families from dependence to independence. They have all the support services they need, in one facility, to move on to the next phase of life with dignity."

"This has been an amazingly successful collaboration with the UB Law School and several other partners," Granchelli adds. "We had a vision, it did-



Professor George W. Hezel, director of the Law School's Affordable Housing Clinic

n't seem like it was going to happen at one point, but now it is. There's no other housing like this in the entire county."

Created in 1987, the UB clinic is the granddaddy of affordable housing clinics at U.S. law schools. Its national prominence is why the clinic was selected as the home base for the American Bar Association's *Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Development Law*.

Today there about two dozen affordable-housing clinics in operation nation-

wide, but in the late '80s clinics at UB, Yale and Seton Hall University pioneered the field, championing a movement to bring practical work experience into the classroom, while providing students with meaningful ways to improve their communities.

UB Law School also offers several other clinics, including ones addressing



Julia A. Solo '95, who spoke on "What's New With 202's (federally assisted housing for the low-income elderly) and the Brownfield Credit"

Bringing it home

Beyond the hands-on work of helping to establish housing for needy families, the Affordable Housing Clinic has an educational function as well. That was its mission on Sept. 22 when the clinic co-sponsored the New York State Bar Association's second annual Upstate Affordable Housing Conference. Held at the Hyatt Regency Buffalo, the daylong conference attracted such diverse participants as attorneys, architects, lenders, investors, developers, urban planners and government officials. The broad range of topics addressed included case studies of some of the most successful and innovative projects in upstate New York.

Among the UB Law-connected presenters were three alumni: Julia A. Solo '95, who spoke on "What's New With 202's (federally assisted housing for the low-income elderly) and the Brownfield Credit"; Susan Sturman Jennings '90, serving as a panelist on "Revitalizing Communities With Affordable Housing" in Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo; Jason Yots '96, on a panel discussing "Real Property Tax and Negotiating PILOT Agreements"; and Steven J. Weiss '91, who

moderated a panel on "Preserving and Restructuring New York State-Financed Public Housing." All except Weiss are products of the Law School's Affordable Housing Clinic.

In addition, UB Law professors George Hezel and Sara Faherty, representing the clinic, spoke at the conference.

The conference was a project of the Real Property Law Section of the New York State Bar Association.

family violence, the environment, elder law and securities law.

"UB's Affordable Housing Clinic has long been recognized as an innovator and a leader, with a record of outstanding accomplishments," says Robert Solomon, director of clinical studies at the Yale Law School. "I had the pleasure several years ago of visiting with the clinic and I was incredibly impressed and inspired by the clinic's work."

With the YWCA project completed, the UB clinic is deeply involved in the "most challenging and ambitious project" in its history, according to Hezel. In partnership with the Buffalo City Mission, the UB clinic has secured \$9.3 million in financing for creation of a new three-story residence for women who have substance-abuse problems and their children. Construction of the 122-unit Cornerstone Manor Transitional Housing facility, located on the edge of the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus (BNMC) on North Street in Buffalo, began in April and will be slated to be

completed in February.

With its on-site medical, counseling and educational facilities, and its enclosed courtyard playground, the new facility will replace and significantly expand services offered at the current 60-unit Cornerstone Manor, where overcrowding is a recurring problem. What's more, demolition of the outdated 60-unit facility — located within the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus — will open the door to future development on the medical campus, which, in turn, spurs continued growth of Buffalo's emerging life-sciences industry, Hezel points out.

"This project removes an obstacle to economic development in Buffalo, while providing something better for Cornerstone Manor and Buffalo City Mission," he says.

As a side benefit, notes Hezel, proceeds from the sale of the current manor to the BNMC will contribute to the new facility's operating budget.

"Getting approval for this project involved a fairly sophisticated bit of per-

suasion," says Hezel, who personally pitched the project to state housing agencies in Albany. "It's taken a couple of years to put all the pieces together and convince the political power in Western New York and Albany that this should be a priority.

"This project reflects the clinic's appetite for more and more interesting and difficult projects," he adds. "And it's a great teaching event for students."

For their part, UB Law students are attracted to the clinic's work for practical and philosophical reasons. Some students like E.J. Snyder, now a third-year student, mainly enjoy the hands-on, problem-solving challenges of assembling complex financing packages; while other students like Melinda Grabowski '05 and Lisa Goodberry, a former social worker who is a third-year student, also enjoy helping people reach their goals.

"I'm thinking about affordable housing as a career," says Grabowski, who was senior editor of the *Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Development Law*. "I like figuring out methods for people to be able to afford what they envision as their goal."

Adds Goodberry, "I love the dynamics of it. I was searching for something in law that would make a difference in people's lives."

Because of the UB clinic's national reputation, many UB law graduates move easily into careers in affordable-housing practice with law firms and real-estate development companies throughout the state and around the country. UB Law School graduate Julia Solo, for example, went to work for New York City's Nixon Peabody LLP, which has a large national affordable-housing practice, representing nonprofits, developers and investors.

"For me, studying law was only an option if I could use it to improve the status quo," Solo says. "Housing is very basic. If people can afford safe and sanitary housing, many other aspects of their lives can improve too. It's a building block to a better life, a better society."

Soon, the UB clinic may expand from affordable housing to other types of community development projects, Hezel says. He and his students are investigating development of a free medical center on Buffalo's East Side.