From Aspiring to Inspiring

By Melissa A. Gottz

I never planned to be an entrepreneur. I’ve always dreamed of becoming a pro bono lawyer. But, a businessperson? That’s for those corporate types, and definitely not for me. However, as they say, is what happens when you’re busy making other plans.

On July 24, 2004, I defi- nitely happened, as I became the victim of a fatal car accident. I was left with physical, neuro- logical, and mental wounds that required countless surgeries and rehabilitative therapies. As an incoming third-year law student, I had a choice: abandon my dream of becoming a pro bono lawyer or forge my own path. While others wrote for law reviews and competed for post-graduate clerkships, I was relearning the most basic of tasks, including being able to see.

During my recovery, I knew that the role of a doctor, family members, and friends meant to my own survival. A few years later, it was time to pay it forward. In New Jersey, there were no nonprofit legal services specifically for veterans. I knew firsthand the complications that come from posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, which are the two “signature” wounds of the current wars. I found a way to help one day to an entirely different world around you and to have adapted to a new “normal.”

I’ve been an entrepreneur. Among places, outside, and a few others crazy enough to become involved, the Community Justice Center was born. Opening

in March 2008, CJC provides ser- vices to veterans with disabilities and those who are homeless and with disabilities throughout New Jersey. Here are seven keys to our success that might help you start your own nonprofit:

1. Find your niche. Figure out how you will fit into the nonprofit scene in your area. The media, grantees, and others want to know what makes you unique as compared to other nonprofits that are already funded. It helps if you have an answer.

2. Don’t underestimate the value of “in-kind” support. Cash flow is an issue in any small busi- ness. Instead of asking for cash donations, pursue as many forms of “in-kind” support as possible (nonmonetary contributions of time, services, or equipment). You’ll not only save money, but also end up with a fantastic talent pool. Be creative! Instead of hiring a secretary, we hired a college student looking for on-campus credit.

3. Learn to like hats. Under- stand that, especially in the beginning, you will spend a lot more time being a lawyer and a lot of time being everything else—a businessperson, a manager, a bookkeeper, a fundraiser, and the face of human resources, public relations, and outreach. The more you understand these fields before starting your nonprofit, the easier these roles will be to juggle.

4. Momentum doesn’t just happen. When you’re new, even though your services may be free, cases don’t just fall into your lap. We worked endlessly on promotion and gave many presentations to area social service agencies, government entities, and foundations. We maximized free media, such as Facebook and local television/radio. We convinced every newspaper in town that...
Gideon and Civil Cases  
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Nationwide efforts to afford the right to counsel in civil cases have occurred through the work of NCRC and others. The ABA House of Delegates unanimously adopted a 2006 resolution calling on federal, state, and territorial governments to provide a right to counsel at public expense where basic human needs are at stake. An Alaska state trial court ruled that an indigent parent in child custody proceedings has a right to counsel when facing a represented opponent, and the Washington Court of Appeals found a right to counsel for children in guardianship and adoption cases. State high courts in Illinois, Iowa, North Dakota, and Oregon have found a violation of their state constitutions’ equal protection clauses where counsel is denied in certain cases involving termination of parental rights. Louisiana and Alabama recently extended their statutory right to counsel in cases involving termination of parental rights to cases where the state is not a party.

The lack of a presumptive right to counsel in civil cases can test the belief of the fundamental fairness of our legal system. As Hugo Black once wrote for a Supreme Court majority, “There can be no equal justice where the kind of trial a man gets depends on the amount of money he has.” To learn more about the civil right to counsel movement and how to become involved, visit https://civilrightscounsel.org.

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we were worth writing about and then used the articles in our promotional packets. We received endorsements from prominent politicians. But even after seeing the effects of the momentum, the trick is to keep it going.

5. Know when to say no. Saying “no” is much easier said than done, but it is key to not becoming overwhelmed and burned out. Have clear priorities that further your goals and be wary of deviating from them. There is always room to change your priorities, but the slippery slope of saying yes to too many things will leave you feeling that you have been successful in none.

6. Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate. Constantly evaluate your progress. Know what’s working and what isn’t. Be willing to redirect your path when necessary. Rather than trying to compensate for a weakness, focus on your strengths and use them to move forward.

7. Surround yourself with inspiration. Know what makes you happy personally and make room for it. There will be many hard days when you question everything. Couple that with the often emotionally draining legal work, and things can become dreary quickly if you let them. When things seem overwhelming, consult your mentors or other sources of inspiration for support. I found that the book What if? by James Whitten was infinitive for me with motivation on the doubtful days.

You can find out more about the work the Community Justice Center does, and how to donate, on our Web site at www.njcommunityjusticenter.org or friend us on Facebook at CJC Trenton!

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