

# SPEAKING OF JUSTICE

NEWS FROM THE FLORIDA BAR FOUNDATION

Volume 11

Issue no. 2



BENJAMIN RUSNAK

Nikki S. Weisburd, left, a senior attorney with Dade Legal Aid, spent years advocating for Michelle Charles, a foster child who had been subjected to physical, sexual and emotional abuse by family members. Michelle is now a college student and hopes one day to open a group home for foster children like herself.

## With support of lawyers, foster children bloom into successful adults

by Jessica Brown

**P**ing-ponging between relatives' homes as a child, Michelle Charles struggled to understand why she and her two sisters moved so often. When she was five, her mother died, and her father began constantly shuffling the girls' living arrangements.

When Michelle was eight, she moved from Miami into a home in Gainesville with her grandmother and her grandmother's boyfriend, where she would endure physical, sexual and emotional abuse for the next six years.

"We kind of grew up a lot on fear," Michelle said. "We used to get beat with leather belts, spiked belts, extension cords. It was rough. I used to be depressed a lot."

Her grandmother's boyfriend began molesting Michelle at age nine. When she found the courage to tell her grandmother, her grandmother accused her of lying and threatened to beat her if she told anyone outside of the family.

"She was a mean person," said Michelle, now 20. "I used to pray, waiting for things to

change, waiting for something to happen."

By the time she was 14, Michelle had attended 10 different schools. But, school was one of the few places where she felt safe.

"I used to look at school as my safe haven," she said. "I tried to be as good as possible because I did not want to get suspended. I didn't want to risk being at home an extra day."

According to a 2015 report from Lauren's Kids, between 9 and 15% of Florida's children have been or will become victims of sexual



## Message from the President

*Florida Bar Foundation President Juliette E. Lippman began her term last July. A partner with Birnbaum, Lippman & Gregoire, PLLC, she is a Florida Supreme Court Certified Family Law Mediator. She has received The Florida Bar Family Law Section Chair's Special Award of Merit and the Broward County Bar Association's Joseph J. Carter Professionalism Award. Lippman earned her bachelor's degree at George Washington University and her law degree at Nova Southeastern University School of Law.*

In April, I joined 11 colleagues as part of a delegation that traveled to Washington, D.C., for ABA Days to advocate for funding of Legal Services Corporation. LSC provides a substantial amount of funding to seven Florida legal aid organizations; without their funding, 44% fewer Floridians would get civil legal help. We met with several members of Congress from Florida to educate them on the importance of access to civil legal aid. Less than 1/10,000th of the federal budget is allocated for LSC, yet one-sixth of Americans are eligible for these services. It is our hope that LSC will remain in the federal budget. To view the impact of LSC funding on your congressional district, visit [TheFloridaBarFoundation.org/materials-aba-days](http://TheFloridaBarFoundation.org/materials-aba-days).

While in D.C., I also had the honor of moderating a panel discussion with distinguished legal aid experts at my alma mater, George Washington University. Legal Services Corporation President James J. Sandman, Voices for Civil Justice Executive Director Martha Bergmark, Director of the Michigan Legal Help Program Angela Tripp and Florida Justice Technology Center Executive Director Joyce Raby, along with Foundation Executive Director Donny MacKenzie, spoke about the lack of legal aid funding crisis, how innovation and technology can bridge the gap and how partnerships and collaboration can engage various communities in efforts to support legal aid. It was a well-attended event that we hope to continue hosting annually.

At the Foundation's board meeting in March, we announced the formation of three new committees. The Building Committee will explore the possibility of purchasing an office for staff to reduce money spent on rent; the Spending and Reserve Policy Committee will explore and work toward developing and/or revising our policies to provide more stability and protection against market fluctuations to our overall reserves and ability to provide grants; and the Limited Matching Grants Committee will consider creating a limited source of funds that may be used to assist grantees as needed between grants cycles to leverage and obtain other funding sources that may require limited matching grants as a condition of consideration for such other funds.

The board also announced that we will recognize two lawyers with our 2019 Medal of Honor, the highest award we bestow. At our annual reception and dinner on June 27 at the Boca Raton Resort and Club, Michael A. Bedke and Richard C. Milstein will be recognized as this year's co-recipients. Both are exceptional lawyers and amazing individuals who have made tremendous impacts over several decades. I look forward to seeing them honored along with the deserving recipients of this year's Paul Doyle Children's Advocacy Award, Jane Elizabeth Curran Distinguished Service Award and the President's Award. Be sure to purchase your tickets early as we tend to sell out. Thank you to our generous event sponsors, listed on the next page. We are grateful for their and your continued support of the Foundation!

Juliette E. Lippman, President





Thursday, June 27, 6:30 - 9 p.m.  
Boca Raton Resort & Club  
Tickets \$175  
[www.TheFloridaBarFoundation.org/tickets](http://www.TheFloridaBarFoundation.org/tickets)



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HONOR  
AWARD FOR  
A LAWYER**  
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"If you have no one in your corner,  
you're going to wither away.  
Ms. Nikki was the sun in the room."

Your donation to Children's Legal Services at  
[TheFloridaBarFoundation.org/children](http://TheFloridaBarFoundation.org/children) ensures  
access to civil legal aid for Florida's children.

Former foster child Michelle Charles with her best interest attorney Nikki Weisburd of Dade Legal Aid. Michelle, 20, is now in college. "I've come a long way," she says.

abuse. Survivors are more than twice as likely to spend their working lives sick or disabled, resulting in a loss of income.

For Michelle, help came after her grandmother kicked her out of the house, and she ended up at a youth shelter. There, she told a counselor about the abuse. The police were called, and Michelle and one of her sisters were sent back to Miami to await a court date.

On any given day, there are more than 437,000 children in foster care in the U.S. At 14, Michelle became part of the system.

"I was very nervous, very scared," Michelle said. "I knew the seriousness."

After a few hectic weeks, Michelle met Nikki Weisburd, a senior attorney with Dade Legal Aid's Child Advocacy Project. The project is funded by the Foundation's Children's Legal Services program and will receive a \$75,000 grant in 2019-20.

As a best interest attorney, Weisburd was assigned to advocate for what was best for Michelle's safety and success. Weisburd handles many similar cases at a time and mentors volunteer lawyers who want to help kids in the dependency system.

"One thing that was important for Michelle, that we always prioritized, was normalcy," Weisburd said. "There were experiences that were critical to Michelle, and ways she wanted her life to be. I think other people would have just said no because it was often very challenging to put those things in place. We knew how important it was for Michelle to have a normal life, to visit an uncle, go to a wedding or a funeral of a family member. And we always petitioned the court for that along with all of the critical services she needed to progress through her childhood safely and productively."

For Michelle, having Weisburd representing her best interests meant that she finally felt like someone was on her side.

"Ms. Nikki was the sun in the room," Michelle said. "Her smile is contagious. I may have felt alone a lot of the time, but Ms. Nikki was reassuring. [She told me,] Michelle, we're working for you, we're fighting for you."

Michelle benefitted from Weisburd's support in multiple ways. Weisburd worked to get a DNA test for the man Michelle believed was her biological father. Michelle, then 17,

was pregnant and wanted to find out who her own father was for the baby's sake. Weisburd was concerned about where Michelle was living while she was pregnant and ensured that she remained safely at a group home for pregnant girls. And, Weisburd advocated to keep Michelle close to her sisters, the most important thing to Michelle once the girls came into the system.

"Michelle knew exactly what she needed and was able to articulate it, which is very rare," Weisburd said. "Especially being a child, and a child who suffered trauma. I've always admired her as a person."

Michelle also wanted to participate in the court process seeking justice for her mother's death, and Weisburd made sure Michelle had the support and protections to be able to access such proceedings safely.

"Ms. Nikki advocated a lot for me in court," Michelle said. "Ms. Nikki would settle every problem I had."

Michelle, now a mother of two, attends Miami Dade College and hopes one day to run



Nikki S. Weisburd, Senior Attorney, Child Advocacy Project, Dade Legal Aid

BENJAMIN RUSNAK

a foster home for abused children like herself.

"If I can teach one child to smile, to help another, that's a chain reaction. This person will help one person and it will continue," Michelle said. "If you show a person that you have their back and they don't have to worry, they'll push themselves. They have to understand no one's going to hurt them. That was something, growing up, I always wanted."

## Children's Legal Services 2019-20 grants awarded

Children's Legal Services grants fund legal assistance to needy children in critical areas which affect their safety, well being and future development.

Program	Project	Grant
Brevard County Legal Aid	Young adults aging out of foster care	\$55,000
CABA Pro Bono Project	Holistic representation for immigrant children	\$65,000
Catholic Legal Services	Children fleeing violence	\$66,936
Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida	School-to-prison pipeline reform	\$113,100
Dade County Legal Aid	Dependency, trafficking, immigrant issues	\$75,000
Florida Legal Services	Ending juvenile solitary confinement	\$87,870
Florida's Children First	Systemic reform of child welfare system	\$113,750
FSU Children's Clinic	Children denied education or health services	\$118,847
Lawyers for Children America	Foster children with complex legal needs	\$45,000
Legal Aid Service of Broward County	Restorative justice for children in dependency	\$86,438
Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County	Disabled children's rights in schools	\$49,280
Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar Association	Developmentally disabled foster children	\$65,000
Legal Services of Greater Miami	Combatting overuse of the Baker Act in schools	\$111,328
Legal Services of North Florida	Education, delinquency, dependency issues	\$96,572
Seminole County Bar Association Legal Aid Society	Legal advocacy for children whose custodians suffer from opioid addiction	\$27,775
Southern Legal Counsel	Impact litigation for children with disabilities	\$55,000
University of Miami Children's Clinic	Advocacy for foster children	\$41,250

Total: \$1,273,146



# EJW Fellow lays foundation for change in rural immigrant neighborhoods

by Natalie Disla

**P**assionate about sparking change for immigrant and migrant families, Joseph Cordova, a 2018-20 Florida Bar Foundation-sponsored Equal Justice Works Fellow, practices community lawyering near south Putnam and northwest Volusia Counties.

"They're definitely the most vulnerable people that we have in our country," Cordova said. "The whole reason I went to law school was to be able to serve this community. Now I'm getting to do it."

Cordova's goal is to educate immigrant and migrant populations so they can obtain a better understanding of their rights and laws and use that knowledge to identify legal barriers in their communities. He also wants them to learn to develop strategies to overcome those barriers so that once his fellowship is complete, the communities will continue to progress.

To achieve these goals in the next year and a half, Cordova, who is hosted by Florida Legal Services, runs Legal Literacy and Know Your Rights events for immigrant students of all ages, in which he uses a civics curriculum to help them understand the law. He has already completed 30 events, with plans for 30 more.

For elementary students, Cordova hosts an after-school club called the Law and Leadership Club, which recently performed a mock trial in the Putnam County Courthouse.

Cordova says most immigrant populations in the communities he serves live hidden in the shadows, afraid to stand up for their rights.

"If they can take that next step, then that leadership baton can be handed off to the next generation as they start to take ownership and investment in their own community and start to recognize that we don't need to simply adapt to discrimination and adapt to struggle, but we can overcome this," Cordova said.

Cordova is also working to develop a community leadership coalition in which community leaders discuss issues prevalent in their communities and develop strategies to combat them.

"I imagine it like a Justice League meeting," Cordova said.

He is planning a day-long event this

summer at which he will guide dialogue between community leaders, hoping to inspire more people to take action and create a community leadership coalition.

"I want to be able to say that an entire community got together and identified their own issues and identified their own strategies, and here's what they're doing to overcome those barriers," Cordova said.

Cordova hopes to spark a permanent change in these rural immigrant and migrant communities so that they grow and continue to

progress with a well-informed community.

"For more than two decades, Equal Justice Works has awarded Fellowships to launch the careers of passionate public service leaders," said David Stern, executive director at Equal Justice Works. "We are proud of Joseph and the work he is doing to ensure equal access to justice."



Joseph Cordova

## 2019-21 Equal Justice Works Fellows named



### **Viviana Bonilla Lopez** **Disability Rights Florida**

Lopez will protect and restore the civil rights of people with disabilities in Miami-Dade County by expanding supported decision-making as an alternative to guardianship in the 11th Judicial Circuit. Lopez graduated from New York University School of Law in 2017.



### **Jackie Ebert** **Legal Services of Greater Miami**

Ebert will provide legal training, technical assistance and representation to chronically homeless women and children to remove legal barriers to housing stability, self-sufficiency and self-determination. Ebert graduated from Harvard Law School in 2018.



### **Jon Glover** **Stetson College of Law Veterans Law Institute**

Glover will create and manage a veterans outreach program in the Tampa Bay area to assist veterans and dependents with the process and requirements for removing barriers to benefits by providing pro bono legal aid services. Glover is expected to graduate from Stetson College of Law in May.



### **Victoria Sexton** **Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida**

In South Florida, which is considered a hot spot for human trafficking, Sexton will conduct a community needs assessment and advocate for trafficking survivors by providing holistic direct civil legal services. In May, Sexton is expected to graduate from Georgetown Law.

Fellows are funded by the Foundation through its Bank of America grant program. Glover is jointly funded by Greenberg Traurig and The Florida Bar Foundation.

# 2017-18 ANNUAL REPORT

## Message from 2017-18 President Jewel White

**A**s I look back on nearly a decade of service on The Florida Bar Foundation Board, including a year as president, it is almost hard to believe the transition I have seen the Foundation go through in that time. When I first became a member of the Board of Directors, annual IOTA revenues were at an all-time high. Soon after, the recession hit, interest rates plummeted and IOTA funds followed. Thankfully, the Board of Directors had the foresight to build up a healthy reserve during the good times, without which, weathering the downturn in the economy would have been nearly impossible.

While some may view the dramatic drop in IOTA funds as an obstacle too daunting to overcome, the Foundation, including its Board of Directors and staff, viewed the changing landscape as an opportunity to rethink how we meet the organization's mission to provide greater access to justice in Florida. Thus was born the strategic reset, which has been heralded by national experts as an innovative new approach. If you are reading this Annual Report, you have no doubt read about this bold new direction, but if not, I invite you to do so at [TheFloridaBarFoundation.org/what-we-do/strategic-reset/](http://TheFloridaBarFoundation.org/what-we-do/strategic-reset/).

The first Board of Directors meeting of my year as president was cancelled due to the formation of Tropical Storm Irma, which rapidly intensified into one of the strongest hurricanes ever observed in the open Atlantic Ocean, with winds measured at more than

185 mph. This massive storm impacted nearly the entire state of Florida with hurricane-force winds that extended up to 80 miles from the eye and tropical storm force winds extending for nearly 400 miles. In response to Hurricane Irma's devastating impact, the Foundation moved swiftly to award nearly \$800,000 in disaster recovery grants and also created a Hurricane Irma Story Map that used data to show the impact of the storm on vulnerable groups.

Additionally, we pioneered a disaster-related Legal Vulnerability Index, which determines factors in each Florida county that potentially increase residents' legal risks after a natural disaster.

It would be hard to imagine our lives today without technology, with most (if not all) of us relying heavily on smart phones in all aspects of our life. Recognizing this new reality, the Foundation continues to leverage technology to further our mission. What started as a pilot program in Miami to allow legal aid programs to post pro bono cases online turned into Florida Pro Bono Matters. By the end of 2017, the website hosted cases statewide. And, by the end of my term, more than 338 pro bono lawyers had taken a case to help a Floridian in need.

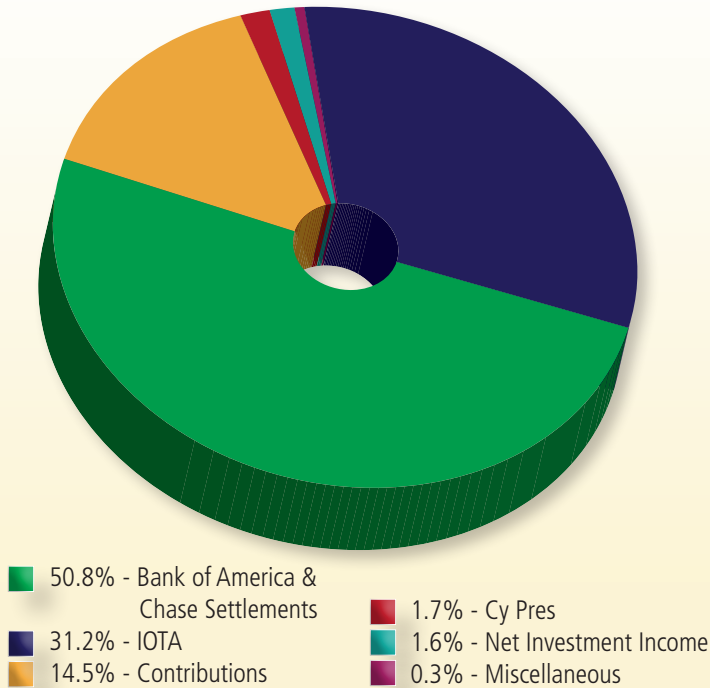
In 2018, we said goodbye to Bruce Blackwell, only the second executive director in the Foundation's history. During his tenure, Bruce oversaw the development, adoption and initial implementation of the strategic reset. He stepped up fundraising, including rebranding the Foundation's



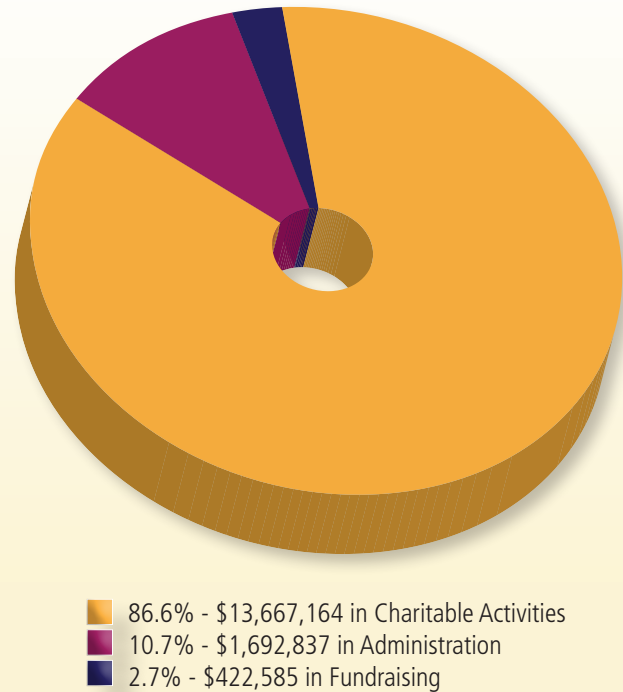
Annual Dinner into a fundraising event. New emphasis was placed on pro bono partnerships, including the use of technology. All of the Foundation's accomplishments under Bruce's leadership were achieved despite the stark reality of diminished revenues. While we were sorry to lose him to retirement, we were delighted to welcome his successor, Donny MacKenzie, another past president of the Foundation.

In many ways I look back at a year that was quite literally a perfect storm. While we experienced many challenges, we turned those into opportunities, and I truly believe the Foundation is stronger now than ever. I am so very proud to have been at the helm during this time of unparalleled transition and growth. In more than 20 years of practicing law and serving numerous voluntary bar organizations, I have seldom had the opportunity to work with such a dedicated group of board members and staff and am thankful to have had the chance to do so!

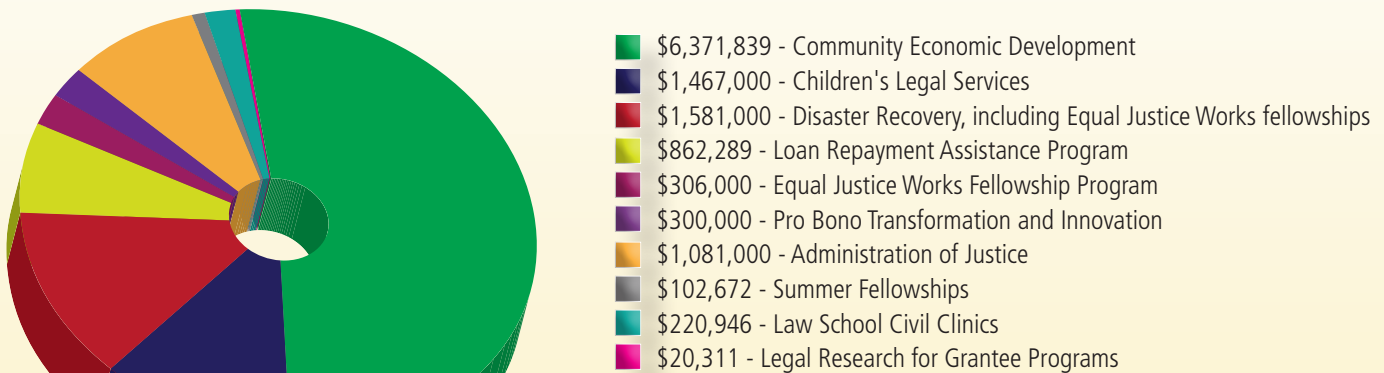
## 2017-18 FUNDING SOURCES



## HOW FUNDS WERE SPENT IN 2017-18



## GRANTS AWARDED IN 2017-18



In addition to the grants awarded, the Foundation spent \$1,354,106 in program support and other charitable activities that provided direct and indirect support to our grantees.

## 2017-18 New Fellows

July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018

Florida Bar Foundation Fellows pledge \$1,000 payable over five years, or over 10 years for young, government or nonprofit lawyers. To learn more about the Fellows Program, to make your Fellows pledge, or to see a list of Florida Bar Foundation Fellows, visit [www.TheFloridaBarFoundation.org/Fellow](http://www.TheFloridaBarFoundation.org/Fellow).



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## The Legacy for Justice

Through February 22, 2019

The Legacy for Justice recognizes those who have included the Foundation in their estate planning, made a gift or pledge of more than \$10,000, directed a significant cy pres award to the Foundation or facilitated a colleague's major gift. We offer the members of this prestigious group our sincerest gratitude for their deep and abiding commitment to the Foundation.

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