



MISSISSIPPI CENTER FOR JUSTICE

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Save the Date!

Mark your calendar for the 2013 Mississippi on the Potomac Reception, to be held June 4, in Washington D.C. Look for more details coming soon.

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Holding-for profit schools accountable

The Mississippi State Legislature passed two bills which add protections for students of for-profit schools across the state, holding the institutions more accountable to students and the state for the services they provide. HB614 and SB2786 call for recruiters of these institutions to register with the state as agents, ensure students recognize their right to file complaints against schools and place for-profit schools with national accreditation under the review of the (Mississippi) Commission on Proprietary Schools and College Registration.



"The bills passed by the legislature are an important first step in holding proprietary schools accountable to Mississippi students and taxpayers. With federal student loan aid accounting for up to 90 percent of their profits, education advocates want to be certain that students are receiving a useful degree from these institutions," said Whitney Barkley, consumer protection staff attorney with the Center.

Champions of these bills include Dr. Eric Clark, Executive Director of the Mississippi Community College Board, House Rep. Nolan Mettetal and Senator John Polk. Rep. Billy Broomfield was also active in pushing for stronger accountability. "We thank them for their work on this issue and join them in celebrating this victory for the state of Mississippi," said Courtney Choi, staff attorney with the Center.



Students from University of Michigan Law School also provided valuable support for this work, including an analysis of the legislation and the development of educational information used by the Center to educate lawmakers about this important issue.

Photos: staff attorneys, (top) Whitney Barkley (bottom) Courtney Choi

Celebrating a new office in Indianola

More than 100 guests joined the Center to celebrate its new office in Indianola, Miss. The Center's staff, community stakeholders and special guests from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation cut the ceremonial ribbon to inaugurate the new space and continue to spread the word about the services available through the new office.



Speakers discussed the Delta's rich cultural heritage, highlighting the need for a permanent resource and advocate in the region.

The program included local attorney Carver Randle, W.K. Kellogg executives La June Montgomery Tabron and William Buster, as well as past and present board members Isaac K. Byrd, Vic McTeer and Debra M. Brown. Delta staff shared their work, well underway within the community, to protect the rights of those living with HIV/AIDS, ensuring special needs children receive the modifications and accommodations they need to be successful students and increasing access to healthcare through the Affordable Care Act. When the program was over, staff members gave

tours of the new office space in the Delta. "Though we have already been working within the community, it was very exciting to formally open the doors to the people of the Delta," said Kim Merchant, Indianola office managing attorney. Thanks to all in attendance and a special thanks to the W.K. Kellogg foundation, whose generous support made this lasting presence possible.

Click [here](#) to view photos of the ceremony on Facebook.

Photo: Center board members, staff, community leaders and W.K. Kellogg executives cut the ribbon

Pro Bono Spotlight: Adams and Reese



Seven years after Hurricane Katrina tore through the Mississippi Gulf Coast, victims of the storm are still living in

damaged homes or waiting to return to the place they once called home. Many of those left out of the initial recovery effort are Mississippi's most vulnerable – overwhelmingly poor and elderly. In 2010, the Mississippi Center for Justice and the U.S. Housing and Urban Development office reached a settlement that designated \$132 million in disaster recovery funds for these citizens, not previously served by the state. Eligible homeowners are able to receive up to \$75,000 in construction and repair under the Neighborhood Home Program.

Unfortunately, homeowners who lack a clear title --or any title-- to their home are unable to get the financial assistance to which they are entitled. Thankfully, they have an ally in The Center's *pro bono* partner, Adams and Reese LLP.

Adams and Reese attorneys took on several of these cases from the Mississippi Center for Justice. Led by attorney Jim McNamara, the firm is working to show colorable title to their clients' homes, opening the door for their participation in the Neighborhood Home Program and to a truly equitable recovery.

Can you help the remaining Mississippians seeking recovery? While some Neighborhood Home Program cases are complicated, many can be addressed with an heirship affidavit or muniment of title. Applicants need only color of title, so few of these cases involve the kind of leg-work that some heirship issues entail.

If you would like to help with this *pro bono* opportunity, please contact [Whitney Barkley](#) at 769-230-2837.

Symposium addresses access issues

Across the nation, as states grapple with shrinking budgets, lower- to middle-income families struggle to access a legal system with rising need and fewer resources to help. This challenge is particularly palpable in Mississippi, a state burdened with the highest



poverty rates in the country. In an effort to ameliorate these effects, the University of Mississippi School of Law, *Supra* and the Mississippi Law Journal organized an Access to Justice Symposium. The Center was eager to participate by providing panelists, moderators and content for discussion. Martha Bergmark, the Center's founding president and CEO, acted as moderator for the Individual, Holistic, Policy and Systemic Approaches session. Reilly Morse, managing director, and Marni von Wilpert, Skadden Fellow, also participated in that session.

At the Symposium, state Supreme Court justices, appellate and trial judges, scholars and practitioners took a day to explore ways to remove barriers to the justice system. Other sessions included "Opening the gates: Legal technicians," "Expanding the providers: Law schools, big firms, corporate counsel and local bar associations," "Creative solutions: Using technology" and "Civil Gideon". Von Wilpert, who provides legal representation to people living with HIV and AIDS, presented a paper about existing [Medical-Legal partnerships](#) and how this model could expand access to justice in Mississippi. "There are more than 200 medical-legal partnerships functioning across the United States and Canada. The Center is working to establish Mississippi's first medical-legal partnership to ensure persons living with HIV/AIDS have access to justice when illegal discrimination

occurs," said von Wilpert.

Click [here](#) for more information about the Access to Justice Symposium.

Photo: Martha Bergmark, president and CEO, moderates panel discussion

New extern continues assistance to North Midtown



Lesley Walters, a 3L at Mississippi College School of Law, is serving as the Mississippi Center for Justice law student extern at Midtown Partners, Inc. this semester. Walters is working to connect residents of the North Midtown community in Jackson, Miss. with *pro bono* legal assistance.

Formerly North Midtown Community Development Corporation, Midtown

Partners, Inc. was formed in 1995 to help revitalize the neighborhood of North Midtown, which is located just north of downtown Jackson. The organization takes a holistic approach to increasing social and economic justice in the community and provides a wide array of services, from an early childhood education program to a community kitchen. They also house The Prosperity Center of Greater Jackson, which works with the United Way of the Capital Area, Mississippi Department of Human Services and CredAbility to offer GED classes, help residents with job readiness and placement and provide assistance in applying for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

In 2009, with funding from the Walker Foundation, the Center created an externship program with Mississippi College School of Law to add a *pro bono* legal component to Midtown Partners, Inc.'s list of community services.

Each Friday, Walters meets with clients on site, and after meeting with Mississippi Center for Justice attorneys, she recommends possible *pro bono* options to suit her clients' legal needs. "The face-to-face client interaction is great. Clients even stop by to tell us when things are going well. There is a tremendous sense of community there and I'm happy to be a part of that," said Walters.

Beth Orlansky, advocacy director at the Center, oversees the North Midtown work, interfacing with externs and North Midtown administration. "This partnership provides the Center an additional view of the legal needs within Mississippi communities. We are grateful to be able to help train future advocates while increasing access to social opportunity for the residents of North Midtown," said Orlansky.

The Center featured on MSNBC



Martha Bergmark, founding president and CEO of Mississippi Center for Justice, participated as a panel member on Melissa Harris-Perry's Education Nation to discuss the ongoing legacy of racial segregation in

Mississippi's public schools. As word of the federal government's enforcement of public school integration spread, private schools sprang up almost overnight, again separating minority students from whites and financial resources. Resources, which, to this day, are lacking in predominantly minority schools across the state. The Center's work to address this inequity in school districts and Bergmark's experience in the Mississippi public school system made her a perfect guest for this segment.