

Legal Aid Association of California

**2024
Awards
of
Merit**

*October 30, 2024
Pathways to Justice
San Francisco*



2024 LAAC Awards of Merit

CLIENT

Sabrena Whigham

African Village Vendors Association at Leimert Park

LEGAL SERVICES ATTORNEY

Michael Ortiz

Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles

PARALEGAL, COMMUNITY WORKER, OR SUPPORT STAFF

Claudia Batres

Community Legal Aid SoCal

PARALEGAL, COMMUNITY WORKER, OR SUPPORT STAFF

Diana Avendaño

Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County

BOARD MEMBER

Rich Otera

Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP

PRO BONO FIRM

Roman Silberfeld and Tommy Du

on behalf of Robins Kaplan LLP

CLIENT

Sabrena Whigham

African Village Vendors
Association of Leimert Park



Sabrena Whigham is the President of the African Village Vendors Association at Leimert Park, an underserved neighborhood that is the center of Black art, music, and culture in Los Angeles. The Association focuses on cultivating, developing, and empowering Black small business owners in order to build economic power within the community and combat gentrification. She also serves as a Community Advisory Board member for the Open Air Economy Collaborative (OAE), an initiative that provides Black and brown female entrepreneurs access to capital, legal assistance, and business development services. Nominator Ritu Mahajan Estes notes Sabrena’s “steadfast commitment to ensuring street vendors, micro-entrepreneurs, and small business owners in Leimert Park have access to legal services, as well as her years of advocacy on behalf of communities of color.”

Through her work with the Association and as an OAE Community Advisory Board member, Sabrena has connected Leimert Park small business owners and community members with a variety of resources to help them rebuild their lives and create pathways for financial self-sufficiency. She has coordinated multiple clinics to help vendors obtain necessary permits and licenses for selling merchandise and food at special events and a weekly market hosted by the Association, enabling low-income individuals to provide for their families. She also regularly collaborates with Public Counsel to offer street vending and expungement workshops in Leimert Park.

“I have deep admiration and respect for Ms. Whigham and have seen first-hand her commitment to uplifting and empowering communities of color,” remarks Josephine Gardner, OAE program lead. “It is evident that serving, supporting, and motivating others is what fulfills her.”

**LEGAL SERVICES
ATTORNEY**

**Michael
Ortiz**

Legal Aid Foundation of
Los Angeles



Now on the cusp of retirement, Michael Ortiz has been a national leader in the field of immigration law and service delivery to immigrant communities during his long and distinguished career. From the beginning of his tenure at LAFLA in 1982, Michael shaped and evolved LAFLA's immigration law practice to meet the complex needs of the diverse and rapidly-changing makeup of immigrant communities in the greater Los Angeles area. "Rarely does one encounter an advocate whose entire professional life embodies a steadfast, humble commitment to those facing dire circumstances," notes nominator Dominique Quevado.

Throughout his career, Michael has undertaken meaningful litigation to advance the rights of his clients. A few years after joining LAFLA as a staff attorney, he advocated before the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals related to a Social Security case. He secured a favorable outcome. His countless wins in cases before the Immigration Court, the Board of Immigration Appeals and the Federal District Court helped ensure that his clients were afforded justice in a way that altered the course of their lives.

Michael always consistently went above and beyond to provide mentorship and guidance to others. He always made time for countless staff members, patiently explaining intricate legal concepts, offering practical examples, and providing encouragement when challenges arose.

"I had the pleasure of co-counseling on several cases with Michael and witnessed first-hand how his gentle spirit and fierce advocacy came together to transform the lives of our clients," remembers Special Counsel Joann H. Lee. "It is rare to come across someone who is as gifted, compassionate, and dedicated as Michael. He has truly made a difference in the lives of so many, and I can think of no one more deserving of this prestigious recognition."

PARALEGAL, COMMUNITY WORKER, OR SUPPORT STAFF

Claudia Batres

Community Legal Aid SoCal



Claudia Batres's path to becoming an advocate for survivors of domestic violence is deeply rooted in her own experiences and her unwavering commitment to justice. Claudia began her career volunteering as a translator with domestic violence services organizations in Southern California. From there, she landed her first job at Chicana Service Action Center and started to expand her knowledge and skills. She provided a variety of services to the clients, including preparing restraining orders and prepping clients for court appearances. Claudia's experience led to a position at Women's Shelter of Long Beach's legal advocacy program. Hired as senior legal advocate, Claudia provided family law and domestic violence services. In the area of immigration law, she conducted presentations and training on community immigration issues and 40-hour Domestic Violence programs.

During her years at the Women's Shelter of Long Beach she studied, learned, and expanded her skills and knowledge. She worked on divorce and custody cases and at the same time went to school at Cal State Dominguez Hills to earn a paralegal certificate. As she describes, her growth happened organically – as opportunities opened, she followed them.

Claudia is currently a Senior Paralegal with Community Legal Aid SoCal, an organization where she has worked for over 6 years. She works alongside attorneys in submitting immigration applications for clients, especially client survivors who have suffered serious crimes like domestic violence and sexual assault. Says nominator Kate Marr, "She has always been driven by a profound empathy for those who suffer and a determination to make a difference in their lives."

**PARALEGAL, COMMUNITY
WORKER, OR SUPPORT STAFF**

**Diana
Avenidaño**

Neighborhood Legal Services
of Los Angeles County



Access to Justice Initiatives Manager Diana Avenidaño played a pivotal role in developing, creating, and implementing NLSLA’s Self-Help Center program, launched in Van Nuys in 2000. This unique model of service delivery, which co-locates legal aid attorneys and paralegals in nine local courthouses across Los Angeles County, has helped over 1.5 million people, serving an average of 10,500 individuals per month. Diana manages the educational packets given to litigants, and makes sure that when the forms change, they are updated with the latest information. These packets include instructions in multiple languages and necessary legal forms. She also oversees the annual updates working collaboratively with a team to ensure accuracy and availability for staff across the centers.

Diana has also been instrumental in the recruitment, onboarding, and scheduling of volunteers and summer interns for the centers where NLSLA is the lead. Over the years, she has personally contacted, onboarded, and supported more than 1,000 volunteers, providing them with meaningful opportunities for community engagement. Her efforts have benefited several key NLSLA programs, including the Domestic Abuse Self-Help Clinics, the Clean Slate Initiative, and the Shriver Housing Pilot Project.

“Diana’s leadership extends beyond her technical skills,” shares nominator Ana Maria Garcia. “She is a trusted resource and problem-solver for NLSLA staff at all levels. Her positive attitude, direct communication, and dedication to service have made her an invaluable team member. Her professionalism and vast institutional knowledge make her an excellent ambassador for NLSLA, strengthening relationships with partners, community members, and justice advocates.”

BOARD MEMBER

Rich Otera

Nelson Mullins Riley
& Scarborough LLP
Board Member,
Community Legal Aid SoCal



Board member Rich Otera started his involvement with Community Legal Aid SoCal (CLA SoCal) when his firm, Nelson Mullins Riley Scarborough (Nelson Mullins), opened an office in Torrance in 2017. Nelson Mullins is one of the few large national firms with an office near CLA SoCal's Compton and Norwalk offices. Rich personally initiated and developed a relationship with CLA SoCal to increase their capacity to serve low-income residents in what is otherwise a legal desert.

Under Rich's leadership, Nelson Mullins' attorneys began staffing CLA SoCal's expungement clinic, helping low-income clients obtain employment and higher paying positions through record sealings. At the height of the pandemic, they expanded by providing critical assistance at several eviction defense clinics and full representation for some clients in eviction proceedings. Rich helped reduce the number of evictions and default judgements against low-income tenants in southeast Los Angeles County by staffing several clinics with his colleagues, facilitating over 260 hours of pro bono support to clients in need over the past four years.

Rich's involvement with CLA SoCal deepened in 2019 when his firm began sponsoring the annual fundraising event and again in 2021 when he joined the board of directors. Rich's support has a significant impact not just on the success of the event but on CLA SoCal's ability to provide stipends for summer law clerks for which the event raises funds. "His leadership, vision, and dedication make him an invaluable asset to our organization and the entire legal aid community in California," remarks Board President Nikki Miliband.

PRO BONO FIRM

Robins Kaplan LLP



for work with Public Counsel

The *Powers v. McDonough* class action had a profound impact on legal services clients, specifically thousands of unhoused, disabled veterans in Los Angeles. Robins Kaplan's dedication to this pro bono case not only provided these veterans with access to justice but also set a precedent that will improve access to supportive housing for disabled veterans nationwide.

Robins Kaplan played a pivotal role in securing this win, dedicating immense resources and expertise to deliver justice for veterans. The firm invested over \$1 million in the case, covering litigation costs from expert fees to plaintiffs' transit to court, and everything in between. Numerous Robins Kaplan staff enabled this victory, including assistants, paralegals, e-discovery specialists, and attorneys.

Roman Silberfeld, Robins Kaplan's National Trial Chair and a longtime Public Counsel Board member, was indispensable in leading the trial. He dedicated countless hours and an entire month in court, providing tireless support that was critical to the case's success. Tommy Du, a trial attorney with Robins Kaplan, was also indispensable, serving as the "right-hand man" in court. His deep understanding of trial rules and ability to adapt to an ever-changing witness list were central to ensuring each day in court went smoothly.

"Robins Kaplan LLP's relentless advocacy provided essential access to justice for disenfranchised veterans who had been forgotten by their government. Their extraordinary commitment, both in and out of the courtroom, was crucial in securing this historic victory," says nominator Kathryn Eidmann.



2024 LAAC Awards of Merit Special Awards

LETICIA MEJIA

Learning Rights Law Center

“Leticia deeply understands the world, and the circumstances, that our families inhabit. She uses her background and education, to help families understand that they have education rights involving their children with disabilities and they need not be afraid to work with an attorney and to confront authority.” – nominator Randi Sunshine

VIKKI PADILLA

Public Counsel

“Vikki is an incredible leader and mentor, known for her genuine concern for both clients and colleagues. Her ability to adapt and innovate ensures that clients receive not just legal guidance but also emotional support during difficult times.” – nominator Elizabeth Gonzalez

ROBERT REYNOLDS

Public Counsel

“Rob’s unique ability to bridge the gap between legal advocacy and community support was critical to the success of this case. His compassionate leadership, alongside his steadfast commitment to seeking justice for his fellow veterans, helped shape the legal team’s approach and ensured that the class members remained at the heart of the lawsuit.” – The Public Counsel Legal Team for *Powers v. McDonough*

LISA SITKIN

National Housing Law Project

“Following the pandemic, Lisa went to extraordinary measures to not only support low-income homeowners facing foreclosure but the legal service providers working to keep them in their homes. She has quietly and tenaciously increased and improved the delivery of legal services to California’s low-income homeowners, and she has supported and mentored countless housing counsellors and legal services attorneys to become a collaborative force for justice.” – nominators Stacey Tutt and Stephanie Carroll

**LAAC staff and board congratulate
the 2024 Awards of Merit honorees.**

**We are all lucky to count you as
colleagues and friends in the fight
for justice.**



Congratulations to Claudia Batres for being recognized with a LAAC Award of Merit for your outstanding work as a paralegal!

Thank you for your commitment to our client communities and for all you do to support access to justice in Orange and Southeast Los Angeles Counties.



**Community
Legal Aid SoCal**

Advocates for Justice in Orange and Los Angeles Counties



ROBINS 
KAPLAN_{LLP}

Congratulations to Public Counsel's LAAC Awards of Merit Honorees!

We proudly recognize [Sabrena Whigham](#) for her steadfast advocacy supporting street vendors in Leimert Park and [Robins Kaplan LLP](#) for its extraordinary pro bono contributions to secure justice for thousands of unhoused disabled veterans.

We also celebrate [Robert Reynolds](#) for his selfless leadership and advocacy volunteering on behalf of unhoused veterans and [Vikki Padilla](#) for her dedicated efforts to expand access to bankruptcy services and promote language justice.

Thank you all for your tireless work in advancing justice and equity!





Michael Ortiz, congratulations
from your LAFLA family!

We are so proud of all you have
accomplished and grateful for
your commitment to justice for
our communities.



**LEGAL AID
FOUNDATION**
OF LOS ANGELES

Congratulations to Rich Otera for being recognized with a LAAC Award of Merit for your outstanding service as a board member!

Thank you for all you do to support access to justice in Orange and Southeast Los Angeles Counties.



Community
Legal Aid SoCal

Advocates for Justice in Orange and Los Angeles Counties

From the team at Nelson Mullins,
Congratulations Rich!



NELSON
MULLINS

Congratulations to Diana Avendaño on receiving a well-deserved 2024 Legal Aid Association of California Award of Merit!

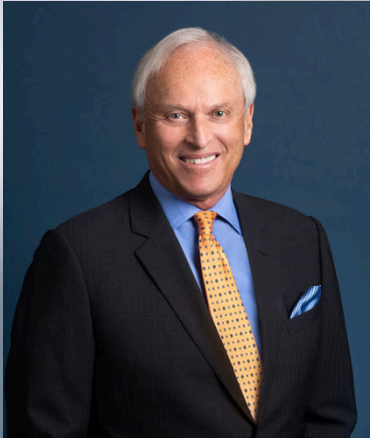
Your dedication and passion for providing free legal services to low-income residents of Los Angeles County are truly exemplary.

We are all incredibly proud of you.

With admiration,
The Board and Staff of NLSLA



Neighborhood Legal Services
of Los Angeles County



ROMAN SILBERFELD



TOMMY DU



We are proud to celebrate our attorneys **Roman Silberfeld** and **Tommy Du** for their exceptional *pro bono* work on the LA veterans homelessness case, which led to a historic agreement ensuring permanent housing for thousands of veterans. Their dedication to justice and service is truly inspiring.

We also extend our heartfelt congratulations to all of this year's award recipients for their outstanding contributions to the California legal aid community.

Your work makes a difference.

ROBINS  KAPLAN LLP

800 553 9910

ROBINSKAPLAN.COM

LAAC Board 2024

Yeison Soto Valdez, Survivor Justice Center
Cori Racela, Asian Americans Advancing Justice SoCal
Randi Sunshine, Learning Rights Law Center
Pablo Ramirez, Legal Aid Society of San Bernardino
Kate Marr, Community Legal Aid SoCal
Lorin Bond, National Housing Law Project
Hannah Brady, Senior Advocacy Network
Lauren Carden, Justice in Aging
Laura Chiera, Legal Assistance to the Elderly
Sandra Chung, Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County
Shashi Hanuman, Public Interest Law Project
Eric Harris, Disability Rights California
Carla Lopez, California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc.
Laura McMahon, Legal Aid of Marin
Adam Murray, Inner City Law Center
Jonathan Ota, Central California Legal Services
Nicole Perez, Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles
Tessie Solorzano, Inland Counties Legal Services
Tyler Press Sutherland, Public Law Center

LAAC Staff

Salena Copeland, Executive Director
Katy Burnett, Communications and Development Coordinator
Yoselyne Cerros, Training and Outreach Coordinator
Hannah Davidman, Operations Manager
Linda Fernandez, Technology and Program Senior Associate
Lorin Kline, Director of Advocacy
Kasia Markham, Senior Attorney
Zach Newman, Directing Attorney
Reann Pacheco, Senior Advocacy Coordinator
Theo Ser-Ramin, Equity and Community Programs Manager
