



# The Progress Report



Issue 6 · Fall 2006

## Mobilizing a Poorly-Utilized Educational Resource: *Parents*

The factors that explain the relative success of Connecticut school districts all too often come back to money. So, accomplishing a lot with a little may be just what this financially-stretched state needs. The educational advocacy role of parents may not seem worthy of a headline, but better engaging parents and realizing their potential can make a real difference in our children's academic performance.

Under the federal "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) law, schools must notify parents about individual students' test results and the related

performance of the schools they attend. Schools judged to be "failing" under NCLB must report that fact to parents and provide parents with alternatives and resources: namely, tutoring services for their children and the opportunity to change schools. Determining whether parents receive and understand the required messages about school performance, then act to take advantage of their options, was so important to the WK Kellogg Foundation that it awarded \$618,000 to the national Appleseed organization to fund research on improving the effectiveness of parental involvement.

### Appleseed's 6-State Research Report

With Kellogg's staunch support, Connecticut Appleseed joined over the past year with five sister Appleseed Centers to research whether parents are receiving the information to which they are entitled and whether they then become engaged to help improve their child's educational performance. We interviewed school administrators, parent groups and state education officials, conducted parent focus groups and

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## Elder Law Education Project Hits the Road

On October 18th Elder Law attorney Sharon Rosen spoke about Advance Directives with participants in the Senior Neighborhood Support program, which provides services to low-income and minority elderly living in Stamford. Sharon explained that an Advance Directive speaks to end of life care, when a person in a terminal or unconscious state cannot communicate, then shared examples with attendees of documents that could specify what they do/do not want in terms of medical care in such circumstances.

### Origins of the Project

Seniors and their families all too often do not have access to reliable and objective information regarding legal options, choices available to them, and choices they need to at least consider making. As a result, Connecticut Appleseed co-sponsored a series of educational seminars in a public "Senior Citizens Law Day" symposium at the Quinnipiac

University School of Law in June, 2005. Participating experts in Elder Law from across the state developed and shared valuable information related to Advance Directives, Wills and Trusts, Long-term Health Care and Prescription Drug Costs, Housing and Consumer Fraud.

Appleseed Board member (and Dean of the Quinnipiac University School of Law) Brad Saxton then suggested a series of educational workshops that would roll out a distilled version of the information presented at Senior Citizen Law Day. Appleseed's Board of Directors, agreeing that the compiled information warranted publication and broader distribution, embraced Brad's idea and formalized it as our Elder Law Education project.

The project's simple premise is that many older adults of modest means need to learn more about the legal and financial issues that confront them.

### Mission Statement

Our Mission is to develop solutions for the causes, rather than the symptoms, of our state's social problems. We will deploy volunteer lawyers and other professionals to achieve systemic changes through legal and legislative advocacy, negotiation, education and other initiatives.



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## Board Member Profile: *Priya S. Morganstern*

Like a basketball team's point guard, Priya Morganstern is our "go to" member for a host of key Connecticut Appleseed tasks. Amidst an abundantly talented Board, Priya stands out as our in-house authority on IRS and federal and state lobbying regulations and a myriad of governance issues. When we needed an accountant with a nonprofit specialty, we looked to Priya for a referral because of her unequalled familiarity with the nonprofit community.

When the Connecticut Health Foundation asked Appleseed in 2004 to draft revisions to the Dental Practices Act that would expand the supply of professionals available to service disadvantaged children, we turned to Priya. After spending a day with Dr. Burt Edelstein, a leading authority on children's dental health, Priya was ready to craft legislative language to extend licensure - for the first time - to foreign-trained dentists willing to serve for 2 years in community dental clinics. Statutory language based on Priya's draft was approved by the state legislature in 2005 - a major Appleseed success.

As Director of the Nonprofit Pro Bono Initiative since September of 2004, her day job is to champion pro bono work and provide legal support to nonprofit organizations that serve low-income populations or that otherwise serve the public interest, and that cannot afford legal counsel. As a result, her clients include a wide range of health, youth, housing, and social services organizations, with a fair number of arts and athletic organizations mixed in.

In harnessing volunteer legal energy from the

Hartford area's largest companies and law firms, the Nonprofit Pro Bono Initiative is a major pro bono legal network in its own right and a kindred organization to Connecticut Appleseed. Either directly or through volunteer attorneys, Priya and the Nonprofit Pro Bono Initiative provide non-litigation legal assistance in the areas of employment, real estate, contracts, tax, intellectual property, corporate governance, obtaining and maintaining tax exemptions, and state and federal compliance and filing requirements - to name a few. Priya makes frequent presentations on these and related subjects to nonprofit leaders, attorneys, and the community at large.

Priya's expertise in topics of concern to growing nonprofit organizations makes her an invaluable Appleseed Board member. In particular, her counsel regarding best practices in nonprofit governance, advice regarding permitted political activity, and her work as a key member of our Governance Committee all provide a direct benefit our organization.

Priya graduated from the Boston University School of Law in 1987 and the State University of New York in 1979. Previously, Ms. Morganstern was Counsel at Day, Berry & Howard LLP in its Hartford office, where she was a member of the Firm's Health Law and Tax-Exempt Organizations Practice Groups, and the Firm's Pro Bono Committee. In addition to the hundreds of hours per year of pro bono legal services she provides to nonprofits, her community service includes serving as President of the national Foundation for the Advancement of Midwifery, and as a member of the Social Justice Committee of Temple Sinai in Newington.

## Stamford Appleseed Lunch



Gathered, from left to right, at our June 6 luncheon in Stamford were: Board President Martin L. Budd, Speaker Michele Coleman Mayes, Senior Vice President and General Counsel of Pitney Bowes Corporation, and Sheldon Goldfarb, Managing Director and General Counsel of RBS Greenwich Capital, Inc."



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## Parents

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listened closely to the challenges mentioned by poor, minority, and immigrant parents when it comes to navigating their school systems. Our findings, published in *It Takes a Parent: Transforming Education in the Wake of the No Child Left Behind Act*, were released on September 27th.

We found that school districts need to become more aware of the real-life barriers that keep parents from getting involved, particularly traditionally under-represented groups. These barriers include demanding work schedules, the economic need to work more than one job, unavailability of daycare, and significant language/cultural barriers. We found that some racial and/or ethnic groups feel ill at ease or even unwelcome among school officials, while others are perhaps excessively deferential to teachers and administrators. Better awareness of these barriers can help school districts more effectively reach out to and connect with all parents.

Perhaps the most powerful remedy under NCLB for failing schools and failing students is the promise of tutoring for children. However, the reality is that qualified tutors are difficult for these parents to access; the qualified tutors don't live in the same neighborhoods, so transportation becomes an

enormous obstacle. The other tool offered by NCLB—the ability to switch schools—is also out of reach for most students. There are far more kids at failing schools than there are open slots in schools in the same city or town.

### Harnessing Parents to Narrow Academic Achievement Gaps

It takes more than just coordinated work on the federal, state and local levels to make sure that parents know the steps and resources available to prevent their children from being left behind. Schools can take small but effective steps to better engage parents in rallying their kids to improve individual and school-wide CMT scores.

Working with ConnCAN (Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now), we're reaching out to parent groups in Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven around the results in *"It Takes a Parent"* and connecting them with resources on the tutoring and choice options available to them under No Child Left Behind. In October 2006 we presented to a room filled with more than 100 Bridgeport parents at their monthly Parent Advisory Council meeting on the results of Appleseed's report and re-emphasized the importance of their taking advantage of all the educational resources promised under NCLB.

Using our study's results, we'll be developing and disseminating a Parental Outreach Toolkit to help parent coordinators and leaders at

schools learn innovative practices in reaching out to parents - particular minority and immigrant parents. While there are parent training opportunities through organizations such as the Parent Leadership Training Institute, Connecticut PTA, and others there is not much support for school officials and volunteers that actively work with and recruit parents. The toolkit will contain practical, realistic, and low-cost steps on how to reach out to and include parents. Accompanying the toolkit will be targeted technical assistance and workshops on implementing the steps outlined in the toolkit.

### Appleseed's Longer-Term Education Agenda to Realize the NCLB's Goals

On a broader level, we plan to work with a range of statewide advocates on structural issues to strengthen Connecticut's public school system. There's no denying that money matters a lot – allowing higher teacher salaries, better retention, curriculum updates and so forth. So we will be working with existing broad based coalitions on leveling the playing field for educational funding for students across the state. We also plan on working to advocate for increased and targeted support for schools in danger of failing (or failing in fact) to try to make sure that no Connecticut students, including the many who cannot readily transfer from failing schools, are left behind.



## A PART OF THE APPLESEED NETWORK

Appleseed, a non-partisan and non-profit organization, is a network of public interest law Centers working to identify and address injustices in their communities. Appleseed works to build a just society through education, legal advocacy, community activism and policy expertise, addressing root causes and producing practical solutions. As one of the nation's largest legal pro bono networks, Appleseed Centers work both independently and collectively, bringing their own experiences to create local solutions that are nationally relevant. We connect the top private practice lawyers, corporate counsel, law schools, civic leaders, and other professionals to tackle problems locally, at their root cause.

## Elder Law

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We promptly found out that senior center directors welcomed a presentation of objective information to their low and moderate-income seniors who could not afford financial planners and legal services. And indeed, we are finding this Fall that seniors are keenly interested in receiving educational assistance about their legal rights, entitlements and legally-related future planning. Such interest seems equally strong across a wide variety of geographic locations and senior center demographics.



*Meriden Seniors Hear About Consumer Fraud from Attorney Mark Connell*

Branford attorney Mark's Connell's tied an October 11 talk on Consumer Fraud and the scammers that prey on senior citizens into a series of workshops that the Meriden Senior Center is conducting on crime prevention and senior safety. Mark, an asset protection specialist with a practice in Elder Law and Estate Planning, is another of the several members of the Connecticut Bar Association's Elder Law section who have volunteered to hold these workshops.

The absence of any self-serving slant is very important to the senior centers. Assurance that objective information would be presented in a non-commercial manner – deliverable through our relationship with the Connecticut Bar Association's Elder Law section - is a distinctly positive feature of Appleseed's project.

Another remarkable attribute is the quality of the information we are distributing. We are grateful to each of the contributing attorneys to Appleseed's "Connecticut Elder Law Resources" publication, including:

**Edward D. Abdelnour** of Cummings & Lockwood

**Lisa Nachmias Davis** of Tyler, Cooper & Alcorn

**Cheryl Diane Feuerman** of Connecticut Legal Services, Inc.

**Richard S. Fisher** of Cacace, Tusch & Santagata



*Pro bono attorney Sharon Rosen visits with Stamford seniors*

**Judith Hoberman** of Shedd and Hoberman, L.L.C.

**Kate McEvoy** of the Agency on Aging of South Central CT

**Pamela Meliso** of the Center for Medicare Advocacy

**Heather J. Rhoades** of Cummings & Lockwood

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