Defending the Promise

2019 Winter Institute Report

“...Public defenders need to be a central player in the movement that we’re all part of if we’re going to get to somewhere real. If we’re going to get to somewhere genuine, public defenders have to play a leadership role, they have to be embraced by the movement; and any conversation that is an articulation of that fight – prosecutorial accountability, bail reform, sentencing reform, police violence – if public defenders aren’t there, we are self-sabotaging our movement.” – Raj Jayadev, 2018 MacArthur ‘Genius’ Fellow & Founder of Silicon Valley De-Bug (SV De-Bug)

Gideon’s Promise welcomed over 300 public defense professionals to our Winter Institute January 16-20, 2019, in Atlanta, GA. This Winter Institute focused on “Defending the Promise” of equal justice in America. The Trainer Development Conference (TDC) kicked-off the Institute, inspiring public defense trainers and law school clinicians to think differently about the role public defenders can play in the communities they represent and how to best advocate for the accused. Susan Leff, Assistant Public Defender for Nevada County, CA, stated that she, “…learned so much more about what really helps public defenders learn.”

As TDC continued, the Leadership Summit, CORE 101 and Alumni Program began, and the Winter Institute was in full-swing. Over 250 defenders from new line attorneys to heads of local and state systems joined the Institute to participate in sessions on topics that ranged from “Raising our Consciousness on Implicit Bias: A Public Defender’s Dream Kit,” to “Dynamic Mindfulness.” Gideon’s Promise uniquely goes beyond trial skills training and offers long-term support, mentorship and leadership development to compassionate public defense professionals who embrace our innovative approach to criminal justice reform.

Public defense professionals explored how they put client-centeredness into practice during a values-based Gallery Walk focused on loyalty, dignity, preparedness and communication. Afterwards the community debriefed on challenges they face while upholding those values for clients and their families. Seasoned public defenders gave advice on how they overcame similar challenges to practice client-centered representation in their jurisdictions.

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Igniting Change

Mark your calendars on March 11-15th for Gideon’s Promise Week, and join us in celebrating members of our community and champions of equal justice. On March 15th, Gideon’s Promise Week ends with our annual celebration Igniting Change. This year’s theme is Black & White Affair. The Gritz & Jelly Butter Band will entertain attendees with their unique mix of Soul, R&B, Reggae and Classic Rock. We look forward to seeing you at this glamorous event at The Ritz-Carlton in downtown Atlanta.

Gideon’s Promise will be honoring the following champions of equal justice for their efforts:

- **John R. Lewis Lifetime Achievement Award**: Dr. Gary A. McGaha, President of Atlanta Metropolitan State College (pictured right)
- **Community Impact Award**: Nzinga Shaw, Chief Diversity & Inclusion Officer of the Atlanta Hawks and State Farm Arena (pictured right)

Click HERE to buy tickets and see photos and a video from last year’s Igniting Change.

For more information on sponsorship opportunities, contact Christopher Pearson at Christopher@gideonpromise.org or 404-921-3836.

Sponsors for Igniting Change 2019 include the following:

- Atlanta Hawks
- Atlanta Metropolitan State College Foundation
- Bondurant Mixson & Elmore
- Delta Community Credit Union
- Positive Promotions
- The Cochran Firm Atlanta
- The CP Law Group, LLC

Special Thanks to:

- Dorothy Hornbuckle
- Good Neighbor Foundation
- The Law Office of Ken Lanier
- The Ritz-Carlton (Downtown), Atlanta

Annual Awards Dinner >>>

In the Community >>>

2019 Public Interest Legal Career Fair

Gideon’s Promise attended the 42nd annual 2019 Public Interest Legal Career Fair, hosted by New York University School of Law, a Gideon’s Promise law school partner. Dr. Elizabeth Jones, Training & Recruitment Director for Gideon’s Promise, helmed the Gideon’s Promise table and met with students who are interested in a public defense career. Dr. Jones encouraged students to join Gideon’s Promise to help in transforming public defense systems. Alexandra Stephens of the Class of 2017 said, “LSPP really gave me the opportunity to put myself in front of these [public defender] chiefs and interview with them before I had been barred. And I don’t really think [for] a lot of the offices, you would get the chance to do that outside of LSPP.”

Ilham Askia, Executive Director of Gideon’s Promise, discussed “Mobilize to Humanize: How Public Defenders are Transforming the Criminal Justice System” with students at a lunchtime talk. Students learned about the unique position public defenders occupy between a vulnerable person and the State trying to remove their rights. Attendees walked away knowing that as public defenders, they have the most important role and a duty to ensure people who are accused have an advocate by their side.

Six Gideon’s Promise partner and affiliate public defender offices were also in attendance at New York University School of Law’s 2019 Public Interest Legal Career Fair: the King County Department of Public Defense in Seattle, WA; the Law Office of the Montgomery County Public Defender in Norristown, PA; the Legal Aid Society of New York in New York City, NY; the Mecklenburg County Public Defender’s Office in Charlotte, NC; the Metropolitan Public Defender’s Office (a.k.a. the Nashville Defenders) in Nashville, TN (pictured right); and the Public Defender Program of the 15th Judicial District in Lafayette, LA (pictured above).

See what we’re up to, watch our latest video.
At the 2019 Winter Institute Welcome Dinner, Gideon’s Promise honored the following individuals for their outstanding efforts in amplifying public defense work in the movement for reform the criminal justice system:

- JaKathryn Ross, Senior Director, Community Affairs at Georgia-Pacific - Ambassador Award for raising awareness about the importance of Gideon’s Promise, the public defenders we serve, and the tens of thousands of lives being touched by our lawyers.
- Travis Bell, Assistant Public Defender at the Montgomery County Public Defender in Montgomery, AL - Ambassador Award for putting together a well-structured intern program for summer law clerks and actively recruiting for the LSPP program.
- Shawn Hoover, Southwest Georgia Conflict Defender for the Cordele Judicial Circuit in Cordele, GA - Foot Soldier Award for outstanding client-centered representation as the only conflict attorney in his jurisdiction.

No Winter Institute would be complete without the traditional group hug on Sunday! Check out a photo gallery and video from the 2019 Winter Institute HERE!

* Click HERE to watch Raj Jayadev’s keynote address online.

Founder of Silicon Valley De-Bug and 2018 MacArthur ‘Genius’ Fellow, Raj Jayadev, delivered a riveting keynote address titled, “David’s Slingshot: The Public Defender as the Weapon Our Communities Need to Take on Goliath.” Public defender offices are uniquely placed between the legal system and those most vulnerable to it, giving them an opportunity to rally their communities to act in their own best interests. If they know a legal practice will harm the communities they serve, Jayadev said public defenders are “…an extension of the movement,” whose “…responsibility is to alert the community and translate it in a way that activates their power.” Jayadev gave examples of how public defender offices in California and Pennsylvania inspired the communities they serve to defeat practices or proposals that would disproportionately impact them. Empowered public defenders can inspire people in the communities they serve to ignite change in their local legal system.

On Saturday evening, 34 public defenders in the Class of 2016 graduated from the 3-year CORE 101 program. Gideon's Promise is proud to support the ongoing development of today's public defenders into tomorrow's justice reform leaders.

*Click HERE to hear more from Marshall and other LSPP participants about the program.*

**Participant Spotlight >>>**

During the 2019 Winter Institute, Marshall Thomas (pictured right), from the Class of 2018, spoke with Gideon’s Promise about his experience in the Law School Partnership Project (LSPP). Marshall is a graduate of New York University School of Law, a Gideon’s Promise LSPP partner law school, currently working for the East Baton Rouge Office of the Public Defender in Baton Rouge, LA, a Gideon’s Promise public defender public defender office.

“There is no way I could ever have gone to the office I work at now without the Law School Partnership Project. I came to law school absolutely wanting to work in the kind of offices that Gideon’s [Promise] works in. But what I found out, at least part [of the] way through law school, is exactly how hard it is to get there if you’re not from the area. So, if you are coming – I went to law school in New York, and in order to work at an office like Baton Rouge, you need to take the Louisiana Bar. And you need to know that you’re going to Louisiana. But an office like Baton Rouge does not have the money to hire people 8-months, 9-months in advance, in time for you to sign up for the Bar. So the only way that I could know that I was going to Baton Rouge or anywhere like that, was to do the Law School Partnership Project. And that allows offices like mine to hire people far in advance to not have to worry about the money and just go out and look for the people they want to work there. And for people like me to get to go to places that wouldn’t be able to hire me in time for me to know where I’m going, take the Bar, and get myself down there to do the work. So, I really owe being where I am to the program.” – Marshall Thomas

Click HERE to hear more from Marshall and other LSPP participants about the program.
In January, members of the Gideon’s Promise community have been featured in local and national media. Jonathan Rapping, Gideon’s Promise president, 2014 MacArthur ‘Genius’ fellow, and professor at Atlanta’s John Marshall Law School was a guest on the Appeal’s podcast, “Justice in America,” with hosts Josie Duffy Rice and Clint Smith. Listen to season 2, episode 1 online HERE.

Martesha Johnson, Chief Public Defender for the Nashville Defenders, and that city’s first African American chief defender since its 1961 inception, in Tennessee, was on the cover of the Nashville Scene representing for her hometown and the heroic work she and her office do daily, saying in her interview, “money should not be the determining factor of the type of justice you get.” Read her cover story online HERE.

First-year public defender, Lauren Zitsch in the Class of 2018, co-authored an article titled, “Lessons from Our First Year as Public Defenders,” with a colleague at the Montgomery County Public Defender’s Office in Norristown, PA, a Gideon’s Promise partner. Her Chief Public Defender, Dean Beer, a frequent participant in our Leadership Summit, excitedly shared the article from Sidebar, the local lawyer’s quarterly publication. Read their “Lessons” online HERE.

Gideon’s Promise is overjoyed when members of our community are published publicly. Their heartfelt commentaries on the powerful positions public defenders occupy, the challenges they face, and how they’re supported to overcome them work to challenge negative narratives about public defenders and their clients.

Special Thanks to the Following Organizations

The William Josef Foundation, Inc.