



HARRIETT BUHAI  
CENTER FOR  
FAMILY LAW



# ANNUAL REPORT

2008 – 2010





## Providing a Lifeline for Poor Families

**UNITED WAY** of Greater Los Angeles reports that the poverty rate in LA County has risen to 15%, surpassing that of the nation as a whole, while nearly 4 in 10 L.A. County residents suffer extreme poverty.

From 2008 through 2010, the Center's typical client was a single mother, head of household, with two children and subsisting on an average annual household gross income of just over \$10,000.

Poverty steals a child's potential. Children in poverty are at high risk for hunger, homelessness, violence, education failure, substance abuse, and debilitating health issues. L.A. County's overall child poverty rate, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, is 1 in 5. Yet in areas served by the Center, that rate is 36%, among the highest in the nation.

The legal struggles of Center clients, intensified by economic instability, range from domestic abuse and divorce and spousal support to equitable division of property, pensions, child custody, and housing issues. Deep cuts in state and local social programs and the shortcomings of welfare reform have left millions without a lifeline.

The need for free legal services is great and the demand for the Center's services continues to rise due to the stress created by economic hardship, which is historically accompanied by an increase in domestic violence. Poor families are particularly hit because household income often depends on those jobs that are the first to be lost during downturns. Center clients often face huge

economic obstacles just to arrive at the Center to receive its free services: taking a day off work from a minimum-wage job, struggling to find childcare and arranging transportation without a car or money for gas.

Providing a lifeline wouldn't be possible without the Center's staff, board of directors, volunteer lawyers, law students and paralegals. Between 2008 and 2010, 588 individuals donated 42,296 hours of free legal service.

These thousands of hours represent legal challenges no different from those that are faced by people of means. Yet complex cases that would be dealt with over weeks or months in private law offices, using resources available to those who can pay, must often be handled with few options in hours or days by Center staff and pro bono attorneys in the Center's volunteer programs.

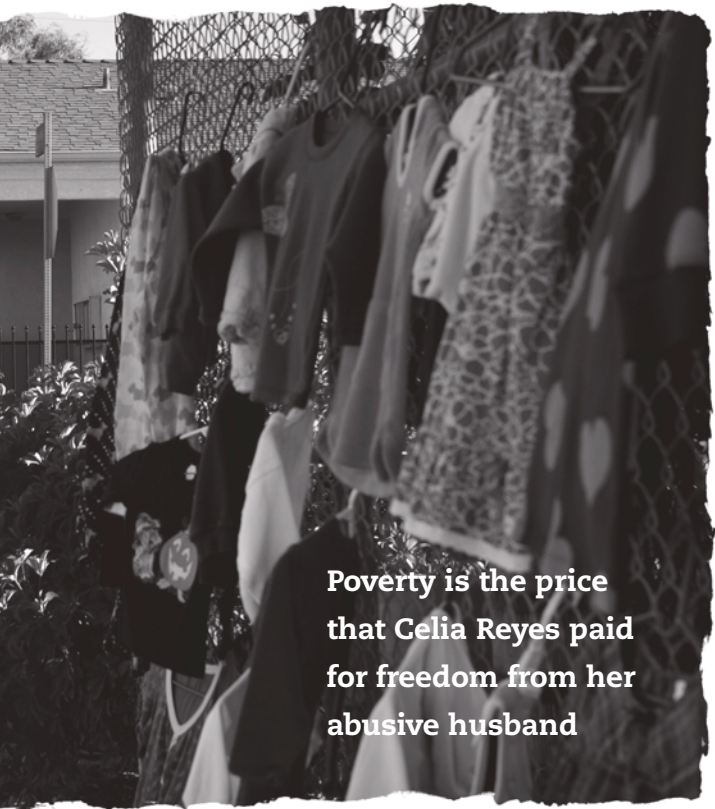
The Harriett Buhai Center's services through in-office appointments and community outreach help provide economic stability to struggling families so that a parent can leave a violent spouse and still provide food, shelter and healthcare for herself and her children or so that a disabled woman unable to work can afford a home and no longer sleep on the streets. The Center's clients arrive struggling but leave with a renewed sense of empowerment, self-esteem and with a foundation for a better life for themselves and their children.

*"The attorneys who helped me were not only good lawyers but very good people. Without the Center's help, I am not sure what I would have done or where I'd be right now." —M.A.*



*"I am very appreciative for the Center's help. I sought other help before I came here but there was none that I could afford. I feel that I finally found a group of people that are compassionate about my situation and really care about helping me live a happy and safe life with my children." —A.J.*

Domestic violence inflicts physical and emotional harm. It is a significant cause of poverty, unemployment, and health problems among women, who disproportionately make up more than half of all poor Americans.



Poverty is the price that Celia Reyes paid for freedom from her abusive husband

## Abuse or Poverty: A Fair Choice?

**POVERTY** is the price that Celia Reyes\* paid for freedom from her abusive husband.

Two years ago, Celia and her two children lived a life of modest financial stability in a lower middle-class neighborhood. Today,

\*The client's name and some details of her case have been changed to protect her identity.

they scrape by on food stamps, Medi-Cal, and less than \$500 a month in welfare aid.

"It hurts me that my kids are not able to have everything they need for school," says this shy, soft-spoken woman in her 30s. "It's hard when you don't know if you're going to eat tomorrow."

Celia, who speaks little English, had been left battered physically and emotionally after 18 years of abuse by her husband. She was hit for any imagined infraction and told that she was stupid and worthless. She was not allowed to talk to relatives or neighbors. She had no access to money.

Feeling trapped and helpless, Celia found the courage to leave on the day that her quiet 15-year-old son questioned why she tolerated his father's mistreatment, telling her, "You don't deserve all that." Somehow, those simple words, Celia says, were what she needed to hear. She and her children fled to a shelter.

At first, it was enough just to be away from her abuser. "I just wanted to be free."

The family's situation, however, was desperate. While she and her children were subsisting far below the federal poverty level, her husband still lived comfortably in the family home. When a social worker referred Celia to the Harriett Buhai Center, she learned that she was entitled to child and spousal support and community property benefits. As wife, mother, and homemaker, Center staff pointed out, Celia had contributed to her family's welfare.

It won't be easy. Celia's legal problems—a long-term restraining order, divorce, spousal support, division of several pensions, debt accumulation—are an urgent, complex tangle that the Center continues to work long hours to resolve in and out of court.

And the clock is ticking: when Celia finishes the educational and vocational training she has received through L.A. County, her

children will have graduated from high school. These laudable milestones will make Celia ineligible for further cash aid before she is able to establish her own financial stability. She will also lose her rent-controlled apartment and other benefits.

Yet Celia Reyes is one of the lucky ones. She found help in today's fraying, patchwork safety net. Despite her hard work toward independence, however, homelessness still shadows her. The Center is doing everything it can to aid this courageous mother in her fight for a better future.

"I am thankful that they are willing to continue to try to get help for me," Celia said gratefully, "even though it's been so difficult."

*"It's hard when you don't know if you're going to eat tomorrow."*

*"It hurts me that my kids are not able to have everything they need for school."*



## Our Services

FROM 2008 through 2010, more than 80% of the low-income individuals receiving direct legal assistance at the Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law were women of color, reflecting another sobering national statistic: black and Latina women suffer the highest poverty rates. Most Center clients are renters, with less than a high school degree. Some are homeless. Many are the working poor, who risk their jobs to seek legal help and 1,400 clients during this period received public assistance.



With the commitment of its dedicated staff and volunteers, the Center continues to rise to these challenges, providing clients with high-quality self-help instruction and pro bono representation. From 2008–2010 the Center provided direct legal services to over 4,100 clients, affecting the lives of over 6,000 children.

And the Center’s service extends far beyond its walls.

Incarcerated Mothers, the Center’s legal education program, reached 10,000 female inmates in L.A. County Jail in Lynwood from 2008–2010 with classroom-style, empowering information on family law and domestic violence topics. Many of these participants were mothers, jailed for nonviolent offenses and facing custody and child-support issues.

From 2008–2010, nearly 200 at-risk students in the various Los Angeles County Community College Districts were able to access similar legal counseling in the Center’s expanding on-campus program. During the 3 year period of 2008 through 2010, a total of 6,000 persons were aided through telephone referrals. Center staff and volunteers also imparted family law information to over 3,600 members of the community in nearly 90 separate outreach events.

Yet statistics are only part of the story. What may be the Center’s most profound accomplishment is intangible: the transformation that can occur when those who feel invisible to mainstream society are listened to, treated with respect, informed and able to use the legal tools that can offer hope for a better future.

*“The Center helped me with everything. Even though I was going through some rough times the experience at the Center was great. Because of the Center’s help, I was able to get out of the situation I was in. They were more than just my attorneys, they were my psychologists too. They made a difference in my life.” —N.R.*

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# Our Programs

## SELF-HELP ASSISTANCE

In pursuit of equal justice for individuals who cannot afford a lawyer, the Center trains volunteer lawyers and law students to aid impoverished individuals to represent themselves in court. Working in partnership with Center staff, volunteers assist clients with critical life problems regarding custody and visitation, domestic violence, paternity establishment, family support and divorce. This pioneering approach has served as a model for self-help programs in Los Angeles County and been at the forefront of similar efforts throughout the U.S. With the assistance of dedicated volunteers, the Center provides free legal aid to over 1,000 individuals each year.

## PRO BONO PANEL

Using volunteer lawyers from the local community, the Center provides several thousand hours of free legal representation to clients each year who are unable to present their own cases in court. The panel acts as a lifeline to very low-income clients who are scared, overwhelmed and cannot fairly represent themselves due to severe abuse, physical or mental disability or other circumstances. Professionals such as pension lawyers, real estate appraisers, psychologists and accountants, providing specialized advice and assistance in certain cases, are also utilized.

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Over sixty percent (60%) of the Center's clients report a history of domestic violence, most of them women. The Center provides intensive, ongoing legal assistance to victims, some of whom are undocumented and others living at shelters. In addition to helping them secure orders for protection, the Center helps shield their children from harm and provides the foundation for a stable and successful future by obtaining appropriate orders for custody, visitation and support for victims.

## COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community colleges play an important role helping low-income students and their families become self-sufficient. Providing the support they need to stay in school is important not only to the individual students but to the community as a whole. The Center fills the needed gap of legal assistance for low-income community college students who are experiencing domestic violence and other family problems with on-site day long sessions on area campuses. Partnering with various schools, the Center provides individual legal counseling and group educational presentations.

## INCARCERATED MOTHERS

The incarceration of large numbers of low-income women in California, the majority of whom are mothers, has profound negative consequences on

their children and their families. In response to pressing community need, the Center has created two cutting-edge programs designed to improve outcomes for the women and their children and reduce recidivism. The Center accomplishes this mission through legal education taught weekly at the women's jail in Los Angeles on child welfare, domestic violence and other family law topics, and by direct legal assistance to mothers released from jail or prison seeking reunification under the "best interests" of children standard.

## VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT

The Center maintains an active program of recruiting, training, and educating volunteers to help its low-income clients while providing a vehicle for lawyers in the community to give back. Dedicated professionals, paraprofessionals and students aid in preparing pleadings, providing counsel and advice, and representing individuals in court. They generate over 10,000 hours of donated time each year. The Center places a special focus on recruiting and training law students, who are public interest lawyers of the future.

### 2008–2010 Advisory Council

The following distinguished individuals served as members of the Center's Advisory Council during all or part of the three-year period from 2008-10.

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The individuals listed here were employed by the Harriett Buhai Center for all or part of the three-year period beginning January 2008 and ending December 2010.

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# Our Volunteers

We are proud to recognize all of the attorneys, paralegals, law graduates, law students and community volunteers who together provided over 42,000 hours of assistance to the Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law during the calendar years 2008, 2009 and 2010.

Evane K. Abbassi  
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# A Dose of Reality

WHEN Board President Valerie Cohen joined the Harriett Buhai Center in 2001 as a volunteer, "I had my head turned around," she said.

An insurance defense attorney, Valerie had put her career on hold until her children were grown. At the time, she viewed the Center's pro bono program as a way to retool her skills in the area of family law mediation.



"You are directly supervised and given hands-on experience working with clients. There is a lot of opportunity to learn."

What Valerie learned went far beyond the acquisition of a new skill set.

"I had preconceived notions about who our clients were," she

said. "What I saw were just hardworking people caught in terrible living situations."

They are "the people you come across every day—a cleaning lady, a busboy in a restaurant, a bagger in the market—dealing with unpaid spousal support and custody issues. They are women living with domestic abuse, fearful that if their husbands find out that they are coming to us for help, there will be retribution."

Impoverished immigrants come to the Center with little or no English and no knowledge of their rights under family law. And for most clients, with no transportation, no childcare and no paid time off from

low-wage jobs, "just to get to the Center is a tremendous challenge. These are people who are not used to being empowered. They're suffering. You wonder how they can they get through the day with such huge burdens."

Despite the Center's limited resources and the necessity for quick action, the rewards for staff and volunteers can be profound, Valerie observed.

"You see the difference that the Center makes when you're able to help turn somebody's life around in the course of the day. Whether it's getting them relief in court or just sending them off with papers, they leave knowing that there's hope."

.....  
**IN MEMORIAM**

## Yolande Chambers Adelson

December 14, 1927 – December 29, 2010

Yolande Chambers Adelson, a pioneering lawyer and educator was dedicated to social justice, peaceful conflict resolution and making institutions more diverse.



She served as President of the Center's Board of Directors for two years (1991 and 1992) and was a highly valued Board member from 1985 to 1996. "She was greatly respected for her organizational prowess," said Executive Director Betty Nordwind. "To this day, she serves as a role model for board participation." During her crucial time at the Center, Yolande shepherded the organization out of its infancy, into its teen years and into maturity. "The staff and volunteers all looked to her for wisdom, knowledge and creativity," said Betty. "We miss her and are forever grateful."

## Volunteer Awards

### Hall of Fame

- Roger Halfhide (2008)
- Jennifer Saunders (2009)
- Kolodny & Anteau (2010)

### Frances Wender Kandel Volunteer of the Year

- John Douglas (2008)
- Maryam Vahabzadeh (2009)
- Natasha Saltz (2010)

### Pro Bono Volunteer of the Year

- Carole Cohen (2008)
- Laurence Kaldor (2009)
- Erin Grey (2010)

### New Volunteer of the Year

- David Jones (2008)
- Cara Daneman (2009)
- James Whiggam (2010)

### Distinguished Service

- David Azar (2008)
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### Administrative Volunteer of the Year

- Darlene Mowrey (2008)

### 20 Years of Service

- Mercedes Fresno
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### 15 Years of Service

- Angela McGill
- Jennifer Saunders
- Graham Sherr

### 10 Years of Service

- Roger Au
- Martha Avila
- Janet Casey
- Valerie Cohen
- Marina Dini
- Roger Halfhide
- Marcia Kislinger
- Carolyn Makupson
- Carol Palumbo
- Laurie Taylor
- Mary Lawrence Test
- Carolyn Wilkerson

*"We realize we are not alone. You have changed a large part of my life and family in all these different aspects. I admire your professionalism, enthusiasm, dedication, and support." —R.L.*

# Our Donors

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The Center was grateful to have received donations during the three-year period of 2008-2010 in tribute to the following individuals:

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## Financials

July 31	2008	2009	2010
<b>Support</b>			
Government Contracts	540,620	629,002	603,862
Foundations	65,874	44,821	211,489
Special Events	497,627	506,169	481,027
Foundations Legal	145,480	222,139	118,109
Individuals	33,508	45,553	162,470
Estate Bequests*	350,000	4,964	2,150
Client Donations	2,428	2,306	1,035
<b>Total Support</b>	<b>1,635,537</b>	<b>1,454,954</b>	<b>1,580,142</b>
<b>Revenue</b>			
Third-party Contracts	80,389	0	0
Manual Sales	24,319	18,342	31,796
Investment Income	34,226	2,967	3,109
Loss on Disposal of Property and Equipment*		-227	
Total Revenue	138,934	21,082	34,905
Donated Services	2,011,441	3,264,723	3,367,368
<b>Total Support and Revenue</b>	<b>3,785,912</b>	<b>4,740,759</b>	<b>4,982,415</b>
<b>Expenses</b>			
Program Services: Family Law Legal Aid	3,104,811	4,449,157	4,498,525
Supporting Services: General Admin. and Fundraising	416,212	445,433	376,138
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>3,521,023</b>	<b>4,894,590</b>	<b>4,874,663</b>
<b>Increase (Decrease) in Net Assets</b>	<b>264,889</b>	<b>-153,831</b>	<b>107,752</b>
Net Assets, Beginning of Year	909,336	1,174,225	1,020,394
Increase (Decrease) in Net Assets	264,889	-153,831	107,752
<b>Net Assets, end of the year</b>	<b>1,174,225</b>	<b>1,020,394</b>	<b>1,128,146</b>



HARRIETT BUHAI  

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## Mission

The Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law's mission is to protect victims of domestic violence and improve the well-being of children living in poverty. With the help of volunteers, the Center provides free family law assistance and legal education to the poor. We strive to empower people in need and assure them meaningful access to the courts.

## Vision

We aspire to create a community where poverty is not a barrier to those who seek to resolve critical family law matters.

## Who Was Harriett Buhai?

(1915–1983)

In a life characterized by selfless activism on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised, Harriett Buhai set a powerful example. As a certified family law specialist, Harriett provided pro bono legal assistance to needy families in South Central Los Angeles and was an active member of the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles. Harriett was at the forefront of attorneys representing poor women at low or no cost.

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