Women’s Bar Foundation
Annual Report 2011
Since its founding in 1993, the Women’s Bar Foundation (WBF), a not-for-profit, charitable organization, has been providing critical legal assistance to low-income individuals – mainly women and their children – facing extremely difficult circumstances such as domestic abuse, homelessness, incarceration and end-of-life decision making. Our dedicated staff has maintained an impressive level of service to clients thanks to the assistance of hundreds of volunteer attorneys and many law firms. In several key areas, the number of clients the WBF served increased. We hope you will take a few moments to read about the accomplishments of each of the WBF’s five pro bono projects in this report.

This past year was one of both transition and growth for the WBF. In September, the Board of Trustees welcomed Pattye Comfort as the new executive director. Pattye has been a public interest lawyer for her entire career and most recently had directed the Equal Justice Coalition (a collaborative effort among the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation, the Massachusetts Bar Association and the Boston Bar Association). Pattye also oversees our sister organization, the Women’s Bar Association. Rachel Biscardi’s role expanded from managing the Family Law Project to managing all of our pro bono projects. Lisa Jacobson, the Family Law Project Staff Attorney, continued to provide top notch legal advice to callers who were navigating the court system on a pro se basis.
The organization expanded its service to clients in several key areas throughout 2011:

• The Family Law Project staff managed nearly 1,700 calls to the intake line.
• The WBF’s unique model of mentorship grew to include 40 experienced family law and elder law attorneys who provided guidance to the volunteer attorneys accepting pro bono cases.
• The pool of active volunteer attorneys expanded to more than 400.

In the face of a still troubled economy, the demand for pro bono legal assistance is higher than ever. We are pleased to tell you that many of the WBF’s grant providers, individual donors, law firms and corporate sponsors continued their financial support during 2011 which allowed the staff a fighting chance to keep pace with the increased demand for services.

We thank each Trustee for her commitment to the organization’s mission to advance social and economic justice by providing low-income women with access to legal representation and a means to be heard. We also thank the staff and volunteer attorneys for their tireless efforts to fulfill this mission. And to our many supporters (all of whom are listed on pages 9-10): thank you for providing the financial means to allow low-income women and their children meaningful access to justice. It has been an honor and privilege to work with all of you. We look forward to continuing our work together.

Patricia Comfort
Executive Director
In 2011, the Family Law Project (FLP) served the most clients it ever has in its 19-year history. We referred 151 cases for full representation by our volunteer attorneys. We responded to 1,676 calls to the intake line. We provided brief service and advice (met with clients, reviewed pleadings, reviewed the file) to 230 clients. In addition, the FLP trained 175 attorneys in domestic violence and other issues related to family law.

Juanique first came to the FLP to ask for help in obtaining a restraining order against her former boyfriend and father of her three-week-old baby. Juanique’s former boyfriend had been abusive throughout the relationship and, although she had been to court before, Juanique had not followed through due to her former boyfriend’s promises to change his behavior. Eventually, these promises turned into threats of bodily harm if she pursued court involvement. Juanique contacted the FLP after an altercation where he hurt her teenaged daughter and threatened to take away the baby. The FLP was able to refer her case to a pro bono attorney who obtained a one-year restraining order.

Juanique then needed to obtain legal custody of and child support for her baby. The FLP was able to refer Juanique to a pair of attorneys who represented her thereafter. With the assistance of her attorneys, and over a period of two years, Juanique obtained full legal and physical custody of her child, weekly child support payments, and a permanent restraining order against her former boyfriend. Juanique went on to enroll in a 12-week job training program through the Crittenton Women’s Union and was selected by her peers to speak at their graduation. After completing the job training program, she enrolled at Bunker Hill Community College where she is earning a 4.0 GPA in Business Administration while also holding a part-time job at a business research firm.
The Women’s Lunch Place Project provides legal trainings to the Advocacy Department of the Women’s Lunch Place (WLP) on topics such as criminal procedure, consumer law, immigration, new CORI laws, and housing. Without an attorney on staff, the Women’s Lunch Place relies on the expertise of the Women’s Bar Foundation’s volunteer attorneys.

Meryl

“Meryl” is a guest of the Women’s Lunch Place, and a proud mother of a school-aged daughter. She is also a trauma survivor and suffers from mental health issues. Her history of homelessness is long and complex. She had secured transitional housing for a period of time, but was slated for eviction due to the fact that she could not work because of the severity of her mental health issues. Relying on information provided by the WBF, the Women’s Lunch Place staff successfully advocated on Meryl’s behalf with the local housing authority for a Section 8 voucher. Meryl can now look forward to ending the cycle of homelessness for herself and her young daughter.
The Elder Law Project

The Elder Law Project (ELP) recruited, trained and mentored attorneys who provided pro bono legal assistance to 34 low-income seniors who were in need of end-of-life documents, including wills, health care proxies, living wills, durable powers of attorney, and homestead declarations. The ELP also conducted several seminars at senior centers in the Greater Boston area to educate seniors on the need for end-of-life planning.

Michael

“Michael” is a 75-year-old man with significant health problems. He was worried about what would happen if his health issues caused him to become incapacitated. He learned about the Women’s Bar Foundation’s Elder Law Project through a presentation he attended at the Brookline Senior Center. The ELP referred Michael to a volunteer attorney who met with him to discuss the various legal options available for end-of-life decision making. The ELP attorney prepared a health care proxy which provided authorization for Michael’s son to make health care decisions in the event that Michael would not be able to make those decisions for himself. The ELP attorney also prepared a will for Michael. While Michael is low-income, he owns some artwork that he wants to ensure his son will receive upon his death.

The Framingham Project for Incarcerated Women

The Framingham Project for Incarcerated Women provides civil legal information to women who are incarcerated or have been recently released from a correctional facility. In teams, Framingham Project volunteer attorneys hold educational seminars and answer questions on a broad range of legal topics, including family law, housing, benefits and CORI. The Framingham Project operates at MCI-Framingham and South Bay House of Correction in Suffolk County, and at two Boston post-release programs, Kingston House and Aid to Incarcerated Mothers. In 2011, the Framingham Project held nine educational seminars which were attended by 75 women.

Jane

“Jane”, an inmate at South Bay House of Correction, attended one of the Framingham Project’s educational seminars. At the very end of the session, Jane asked why her mother (who was caring for Jane’s child) was receiving notices from the Massachusetts Department of Revenue’s Child Support Enforcement office (DOR) stating that Jane was overdue in paying child support. After some discussion, Jane admitted that she had never
With the support of the WBF, the Hampden County Housing Court Project continued its long tradition of providing critical legal services to pro se litigants facing homelessness. Building on “The Hundred Lawyer Challenge” issued at the end of 2010, the Project recruited 35 volunteer attorneys and 3 volunteer paralegals who assisted 85 clients in 2011.

**Barbara**

“Barbara” met the WBF’s volunteer attorney on “eviction day” in the Hampden County Housing Court. Barbara is a veteran who suffers from mental health issues as well as physical ailments. She lives with and cares for her severely autistic adult son who has cystic fibrosis. Additionally, she is the sole care giver for her elderly mother as well as her brother who is a double amputee. Both her mother and brother live nearby. Barbara was being evicted for failure to “reside” in her apartment (where she has lived for 17 years) because of the amount of time she must spend away caring for her family. Due to the zealous advocacy of her volunteer attorney, Barbara has avoided homelessness for herself and her son, and as importantly, has protected her rental subsidy. Barbara’s attorney sums it up this way: “I can say for sure that I did everything in my legal arsenal to ensure she and her son were not evicted.” For Barbara, the stress of caring for herself and her family members is no longer compounded by the fear of losing her home.

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(“Jane” continued)

pursued a modification of her child support obligations, because she was embarrassed to tell DOR that she was incarcerated and had no income. A Framingham Project volunteer provided legal information to Jane about DOR’s role in collecting child support. She also explained that Jane could contact DOR and notify them of her incarceration. Upon her release, Jane will not be burdened with a crushing child support debt.

“If you had not come here today, I never would have known what I should do about the DOR. Thank you.”
The WBF hosted its seventh annual Comedy Night on May 25, 2011. Ralph Martin, Vice President and General Counsel of Northeastern University, led us through an evening of laughter and charitable giving. Professional comedienne and former legal secretary Stacy Kendro headlined the event with back-up from lawyer-comedian Bill Erickson of Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi LLP and a magic demonstration by Charles Slade of Strategic Patents, P.C. Habeas Chorus of Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP delighted the audience with their legal take on several popular tunes.

More than 350 guests engaged in lively bidding during the live auction which featured vacation homes on Cape Cod and in the Berkshires, a private cruise on Boston Harbor and Red Sox tickets. The event also featured a silent auction, with opportunities to win theater tickets, jewelry, restaurant gift certificates and Patriots tickets.

At a reception immediately preceding Comedy Night, the WBF honored the law firm of Conn Kavanaugh Rosenthal Peisch & Ford, LLP and Attorney Barbara Zimbel with its annual Pro Bono Awards.

Conn Kavanaugh Rosenthal Peisch & Ford, LLP has worked closely with the WBF’s Family Law Project, donating more than 500 hours of pro bono services to low-income domestic violence survivors in their family law cases. Their attorneys consistently go above and beyond the four corners of a particular case by taking on additional legal matters in order to provide holistic representation for their pro bono clients. Conn Kavanaugh attorneys also act as mentors to the WBF’s volunteer attorneys, both inside and outside the firm.

Barbara Zimbel, a senior housing attorney with Greater Boston Legal Services, was honored for her longstanding commitment to the WBF’s Framingham Project for Incarcerated Women where she has been volunteering since 1999. Barbara led the effort to create the first training manual on legal issues faced by women in prison. Barbara also has worked tirelessly to attract new volunteer attorneys to the Project to insure that women in prison and women recently released from prison have access to legal information they need to improve their lives and the lives of their children.
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Volunteering for one of the pro bono projects of the Women’s Bar Foundation is rewarding, challenging, educational, and inspiring. Not only will you receive comprehensive training in an area of law you may not otherwise have an opportunity to learn, you’ll be providing critical services to people who do not have access to legal representation. Participation in our pro bono projects includes being assigned to a mentor who will provide guidance, answer questions, review documents and more. To volunteer, please contact Rachel B. Biscardi via email at rbiscardi@womensbar.org or by telephone at 617-973-6666.

Become a Mentor

One of the most important components of the Women’s Bar Foundation’s pro bono projects is our commitment to provide mentors to volunteer attorneys. Each volunteer attorney is paired with a senior attorney who specializes in a discrete field of law. Over the years, we have found that mentors truly distinguish the Women’s Bar Foundation’s pro bono projects. We need mentors for all of our pro bono projects. If you are willing to share time and wisdom with a new attorney, please contact Rachel B. Biscardi via e-mail at rbiscardi@womensbar.org or by telephone at 617-973-6666.

Become a Contributor

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<table>
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* THESE NUMBERS HAVE NOT BEEN REVIEWED OR AUDITED

1 NUMBERS INCLUDE DIRECT COSTS
January 1
December 31

2011

Total Expenses
$305,498

Expenses*

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