

The Bar Around The Corner: LGBT Bar Association of Greater New York (LeGaL)

Association Address/Phone

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Website: <http://le-gal.org/>

Founded: 1978

Number of Members: 568

Vision/purpose:

Focused on the greater New York metropolitan area, LeGaL is dedicated to improving the administration of the law, ensuring full equality for members of the LGBT community, promoting the expertise and advancement of LGBT legal professionals, and serving the larger community.

Brief history

After posting a personal ad in The Village Voice, 10 people met in now-New York Law School Professor Arthur Leonard's living room in March 1978 and formed the New York Law Group, which met on a monthly basis for informal social gatherings.

Leonard began publishing a newsletter, the "Law Group Notes," reporting on gay and lesbian community events and legal developments. The group grew and, in 1984, incorporated as the Bar Association for Human Rights. Over the years, our name has changed to better reflect the diversity of our mission, of our membership, and of the communities we seek to serve.

In 1994, we formed the LeGaL Foundation, a 501(c)(3) vehicle for all of our charitable and educational activities, with Erica Bell as the founding President. Through the Foundation, the organization still publishes LGBT Law Notes, now a nationally-distributed, largely web-based, comprehensive monthly publication summarizing the latest legal developments affecting the LGBT community here and abroad, with an accompanying podcast.

The Foundation also hosts a network of weekly walk-in pro bono legal clinics, anchored by our principal clinic at Manhattan's LGBT Community Center, started nearly 30 years ago and still serving hundreds of individuals each year. In July, we also celebrated the 20th anniversary of our Dr. M. L. "Hank" Henry, Jr. Judicial Fellowship Program, a funded 10-week summer internship for law students with openly gay and lesbian judges.

Today, we proudly employ three full-time professional staff members. To better manage the operations of our legal services programs, we hired Brett Figlewski as our first legal director last year, for which the New York State Conference of Bar Leaders awarded LeGaL its 2015 Bar Leaders Innovation Award.



LeGaL members pose with Brooke Barone, sixth from left, in front of the Stonewall Inn during the 2016 New York City Pride March. Barone is the mother at the center of the landmark parental rights case decided August 30 by the New York Court of Appeals (*Brooke S.B. v. Elizabeth C.C.*). At front row, far left, is LeGaL President Meredith R. Miller, incoming President Gennaro Savastano and Executive Director Matthew Skinner. LeGaL's Legal Director Brett Figlewski, beneath the "NYS Orlando" sign, was part of the legal team, with attorneys from Lambda Legal and Blank Rome LLP, representing Barone.

He serves as co-counsel, with a heavyweight legal team from Lambda Legal and Blank Rome, in a major parental rights case argued at the New York Court of Appeals in June.

What is your favorite meeting location?

We look forward to returning each year to the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in SoHo for our annual Judicial Reception. There is always a wonderful new exhibit to explore, and the artwork provides a terrific backdrop for celebrating the members of our community and allies sitting on the bench.

What is your most popular outing/social event?

Our most popular event is our Annual Dinner and Community Vision Awards Ceremony, held each March. At our annual dinner, which draws the support of the small and large law firm community, as well as corporations and individual contributors, LeGaL presents its Community Vision Awards to honor individuals or organizations with a distinguished record of service to the LGBT community, including a sustained commitment to achieving equal rights for all members of our community. With more than 600 lawyers in attendance, we have feted many of the legal giants from the movement over the years.

What is your most important current project/initiative?

Earlier this year, Legal Services NYC issued a groundbreaking report entitled "Poverty is an LGBT Issue: An Assessment of the Legal Needs of Low-Income LGBT People."

The report is the first of its kind in the nation and provides insight into the civil legal challenges and discrimination faced by low-income members of the LGBT community. In addition to identifying key challenges, the report provided a series of concrete findings and recommendations to improve legal services for low-income LGBT people, including suggesting a dramatic expansion in services for low-income LGBT people.

In partnership with tech startup Legal.io, LeGaL hopes to help address the access to justice issues for our community by soon launching a new online lawyer referral platform that we hope will be a real game-changer for us and the legal profession.

There are many members of LeGaL that want to use their skills and expertise to help, but lack the resources or guidance to do so. Legal.io provides cutting-edge software to connect new and existing clients with attorneys. While simultaneously updating our longstanding referral service for clients that can afford to pay, the new platform will also help us serve those without the means to cover expensive legal fees. ♦