

# Civil Justice

Newsletter of the Georgia Legal Services Program (GLSP)  
Summer 2020

## Keeping Kids in School

By Ira Foster, General Counsel & Deputy Director and Jeanette Burroughs, Development Director



Pictured are Ira Foster, GLSP General Counsel & Deputy Director and Alicia Batieste

**W**hen Alicia Batieste was a child, she was sent to the principal's office one day during school for disrupting her fourth-grade class. While in the office she had an emotional breakdown and resisted several teachers who tried to restrain her. The school sought to expel Alicia permanently for her behavior problems and imposed a trespass warrant that prohibited Alicia and her mother from entering any school in the district. Ira Foster, who was a GLSP staff attorney at the time, represented Alicia at her school expulsion hearing.

The tribunal officer agreed with attorney Foster's argument that it would be in Alicia's best interests for the school to test her for any undiagnosed disabilities that could be related to her behavior problems. The

tribunal officer sent Alicia back to school for testing and dismissed the trespass warrant. The test confirmed that Alicia suffered from Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and that her behavior problems in school were related to her ADD diagnosis. Foster assisted Alicia's mother to obtain special education services for her daughter, and he developed an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) requiring the school to provide the special services Alicia needed that are guaranteed under federal law.

Foster opened Alicia's case 17 years ago in 2003. In December 2019, Alicia contacted Foster with an invitation to her college graduation reception. Alicia graduated with honors from Alabama State University and earned a Bachelor's degree in fine arts and dance with a minor in communications.

Alicia is a professional dancer with the Montgomery Ballet Company, and she is ambitiously pursuing a graduate degree from her alma mater.

Foster has been working on the school-to-prison pipeline problem for many years and has presented seminars and workshops throughout Georgia to hundreds of students, parents, and school officials. In 2012, Foster assisted in developing an alternative disciplinary protocol for the Bibb County School District, where 600 students were being sent to juvenile court annually, mostly for minor problems.

*(This actual case story is featured with written consent by the client.)*

*"Alicia's life could possibly have gone in a totally different direction if Georgia Legal Services Program had not stepped in and provided assistance to Alicia and her mother."*

– Ira Foster, General Counsel  
& Deputy Director

# Students Have Rights

By Eugene Choi, Supervising Attorney; Jessica Stuart, Supervising Attorney;  
and Jeanette Burroughs, Development Director

**A**licia's story on the front cover is quite similar to the stories of millions of students of color who are victims of the school-to-prison pipeline crisis that funnels children out of the public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice system. Many of these children have learning disabilities or suffer from poverty, abuse, or neglect. GLSP's education advocacy helps them beat the odds.

Education cases are one of GLSP's priorities in breaking the cycle of poverty for our clients. The needs are so urgent that an expert team of five education advocates from our Piedmont office are devoting much of their advocacy to identifying and resolving critical education cases for at-risk public school students who reside in 16 counties outside metro Atlanta, including Bartow, Carroll, Coweta, Douglas, Fayette, Floyd, Gordon, Haralson, Heard, Henry, Newton, Paulding, Pike, Polk, Rockdale, and Spalding. "We represent students to safeguard their individual rights to a meaningful and appropriate education free from discrimination based on race, class, or disability," says Supervising Attorney Eugene Choi.

According to the recent report, "Growing up Rural in America," published by Save the Children, Georgia ranks 42 in the nation for child poverty. The Report indicates 33% of children in rural Georgia grow up in poverty compared to 21% in urban areas. Georgia ranks 44 in the nation with 20% of high school students not graduating on time. Despite these realities, a significant number of Georgia school districts rely on subjective or arbitrary discipline practices to remove students from school, particularly students in poverty, students with disabilities, and students of color. "Although African-American children make up 37% of

total enrollment in Georgia schools, they also comprise 54% of in-school suspensions and 66% of out-of-school suspensions. In the past two years, we have represented more than 200 students," states Choi.

*GLSP's education attorneys are chipping away at existing jurisprudence on behalf of students' rights.*

– Jessica Stuart, Supervising Attorney

In 2018, GLSP achieved an unprecedented victory in a school case involving students' rights to defend themselves from bullying incidents that result in physical altercations against the victims. GLSP presented a bullying case before the Supreme Court of Georgia that confirmed the blind enforcement of zero tolerance fighting policies, which do not consider a student's right to self-defense and subject victim students to expulsion from school, are unlawful.

We collaborate with organizations and community groups to leverage resources to promote GLSP's education advocacy statewide. We are collaborating currently with Georgia Appleseed to address school issues for children who are in the foster care system.

GLSP's education attorneys work hard to ensure that Georgia's children are given the educational opportunities they need to reach their full potential. Advocating for students can be challenging and the stakes are high, but the results are rewarding and far-reaching.



**Selinda Handsford**  
Managing Attorney  
Piedmont Office

*"As the new managing attorney of GLSP's Piedmont office, I have witnessed the compassion, zeal, and dedication of the education attorneys as they advocate for and represent students in schools. They recognize the issues confronting students and the necessary needs of those students to have access to not just an education, but to a good education despite the challenges they may be facing. I am proud of the work that we do to help ensure that students are able to have opportunities that they may not have otherwise been able to achieve."*

## Introducing GLSP's Education Advocates - Piedmont Office



**Eugene Choi, Supervising Attorney**

Education is the key to breaking perpetual cycles of poverty. I do this work because every child in Georgia, regardless of race, disability, or class status, deserves the fundamental tools needed to reach their full potential.



**Jessica Stuart, Supervising Attorney**

Far too many school children in Georgia are treated unfairly and denied access to education. The opportunity to provide meaningful representation to students and to see their trajectory improve is a source of daily inspiration.



**Kamala Buchanan, Skadden Fellow (Harvard Law School)**

Getting to know my clients and their families is a highlight of this work, as is the opportunity to work against systemic inequalities that impact youth of color.



**Taylor Loynd, Gallogly Fellow (University of Texas Law School)**

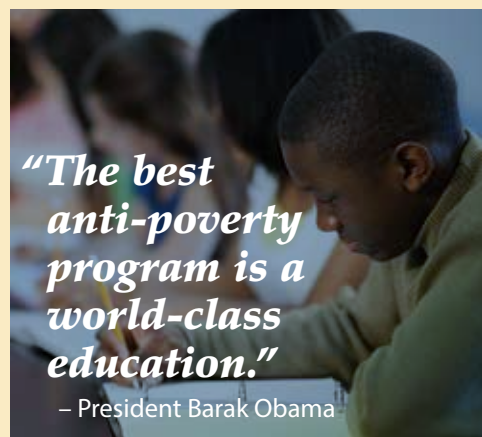
I love working with resilient young people and their families to demand appropriate and equitable education services so that they become more empowered to advocate for themselves against unjust systems in the future.

**One-third of Georgia's homeless students live in rural areas of the state according to published data from the National Center for Education Statistics in 2018. Homeless students struggle with the trauma of homelessness and the challenges of poverty.**

**GLSP handles education cases for homeless students to help them stay in school and beat the odds.**

Kevin and Sam are brothers who were kicked out of a Georgia rural county school system in violation of federal law, because they were homeless and could not prove residency. Sam was a high school senior and Kevin was receiving special education services under an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). For approximately one month, the school refused to reenroll the brothers or provide educational services. GLSP attorneys filed for a preliminary injunction in federal court under the federal McKinney-Vento Act. The court granted the injunction, and Kevin and Sam were allowed back in school. Since then, Sam has been accepted to college in Massachusetts and Kevin has made progress toward his IEP goals. Their mother started a new job, which allows her to obtain permanent housing for her family. This case highlights the failure of this school district and others across the state to follow or inform parents of the McKinney-Vento appeal process, including keeping children in their home school pending a final decision on homelessness.

Richard is an 18-year-old high school student, hoping to be the first in his family to graduate. But, his own mother put those aspirations at risk by charging bills in his name and refusing to pay. Richard made the difficult decision to move away from his mother and live with a family in another county who offered to help him. Richard was eager to start his senior year at his new high school, but at registration the school refused his enrollment forms. Richard's host family attempted to find an attorney who could assist him, and that search led them to the Georgia Legal Services Program. A GLSP lawyer contacted the high school about its registration violations, and requested the school classify Richard as a homeless student under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. This federal law requires immediate school enrollment for homeless children and youth. Because of this GLSP lawyer's quick action, the school enrolled Richard in time for the first week of classes. Richard is on track to graduate with his class!



*(These actual case stories are featured with permission. Pseudonyms are used to protect the clients' identities.)*

# GLSP STRONG

## Working Remotely During COVID-19



**Rick Rufolo,**  
Executive Director GLSP

On Wednesday, March 11th, I was driving from South Georgia to Atlanta, returning home from a visit with GLSP colleagues in Savannah and Brunswick. The solitude of the 4 hour drive was calming yet, I had a lot on my mind. I could not stop thinking about the uncertainty of the global pandemic and its impact on my family, friends, colleagues and our communities. Of particular concern was how the leadership team and I would lead GLSP through these uncharted waters.

Our initial decision was made swiftly; by Wednesday, March 18th, all 150 GLSP employees were working remotely. While there were many obstacles, we procured the necessary technology equipment to help our team transition from their work offices to their home offices. I learned more about virtual private networks, hotspots and Splashtop than I ever expected! Zoom became our new communication platform. But those early challenges did not dissuade GLSP from meeting our clients' needs.

While our physical offices are closed, GLSP remains open. What's changed is the manner in which we interact with our clients. In-person interactions are limited and, therefore, we have developed new methods to conduct outreach with our clients and community partners. For example, no longer able to meet with elder clients at senior centers, several GLSP attorneys created our Elder Action Team and developed a solution. The Team prepared client alerts addressing topics on Economic Impact Payments, public benefits deadlines, tenants' rights and how to recognize COVID-19 related scams. Using emails culled from our case management system, the Elder Action Team sent the new client alerts to over 1,000 seniors and 180 senior centers and other elder care providers.

Managing remotely is also not without challenges. It's quite an adjustment to leave our office routine and convert to teleworking, particularly as we manage through myriad COVID-19 related issues. We have had to acknowledge that it takes time to figure out what works best and what works best is different for each person. The spontaneous discussion with team members that naturally occurs in the office is not easily replicated when managing remotely. Motivating the team to press on through uncertainty requires trust, patience and encouragement...and lots of Zoom meetings!

Still to be decided is when to return to our offices. The decision is not made lightly and will only be made when we can ensure the health and safety of our employees.

Three months into our teleworking journey, the waters are still choppy but we have weathered the storm. We have remained open for business and developed creative ways in which to meet our clients' needs. We have faced many challenges but have turned threats into opportunities. And, through it all, we have supported one another to make a difference in the lives of Georgians who need our help the most.

**We are GLSP Strong!**

Rick

## Welcoming New Employees

(1/1/20 – 8/30/20)

**Sarah Anderson,** Pro Bono Attorney, Savannah

**Lester B. Andrews,** Dir. of Information Technology, Atlanta

**Juan Barragan,** Law Assistant, Farmworker Division

**Kindall Browning,** Staff Attorney, Macon

**Amanda Connell,** Law Assistant, Dalton

**Jason Connell,** Law Assistant, Dalton

**Michelle Clarington,** Law Assistant, Macon

**Monica Kinene,** Staff Attorney, Piedmont

**Maggie Morris,** Senior Director of Finance and Administration, Atlanta

**Madison Morton,** Administrative Assistant, Savannah

**Christopher Pitts,** Coordinating Attorney, Military Legal Assistance Program, Atlanta

**Seema Reddy,** Staff Attorney, Eviction Prevention Project, Gainesville

**Jamie Rush,** Coordinating Attorney, Statewide Domestic Violence Hotline, Atlanta

**Markita Shazer,** Intake Specialist, Albany

**Cynthia Taylor,** Administrative Assistant, Albany

**Shaina Thompson,** Staff Attorney, Eviction Prevention Project, Savannah

**Tina Whindleton,** Administrative Assistant, Albany

# Georgia Legal Services Selected for Racial Justice Institute

By Jeanette Burroughs, Development Director



**Elise Brown**



**Whitney Lee Knox**



**Alison Slagowitz**

**T**hree GLSP employees are participating in the 2020 cohort of the Shriver Center on Poverty Law's Racial Justice Institute in Chicago, Illinois. Alison Slagowitz, an Equal Justice Works Fellow and housing attorney in Savannah, along with Whitney Lee Knox, a supervising attorney and Elise Brown, a paralegal who are from our Piedmont office, will join the ranks of 44 Racial Justice Institute fellows who will complete an intensive seven-month leadership program grounded in a commitment to race-equity as an integral and essential part of anti-poverty advocacy. After the training GLSP's team will join a national network of 240 alumni who are advancing race equity throughout the country.

With support from skilled coaches and faculty, GLSP's RJI fellows will focus their project work on access to affordable housing for ex-offenders. Housing Specialist Susan Reif advocates for the need for affordable rental housing in Georgia, especially for anyone having a criminal record. According to Reif, "Housing admission policies deny housing to people with criminal records, which includes arrests that never lead to convictions, as well as convictions for a wide range of crimes – from petty to serious – that may have happened decades ago, but continue to create racially discriminatory barriers."

GLSP is equipping its advocates with a race equity lens to better understand how clients' experiences connect to a system or practice that disproportionately harms people of color. Six years ago, Litigation Director Lisa Krisher and other staff developed a Race Equity Team to educate our staff on racial equity and to challenge racial disparities our clients face in education, health care, and housing. In May, the Race Equity Team led the staff in developing GLSP's public statement on racial justice in response to COVID-19's disproportionate impact on people of color and the recent killing of another young man of color, Ahmaud Arbery. During the drafting of this newsletter, another man of color, George Floyd, was killed by police on May 25, 2020, which galvanized a Movement for racial justice worldwide.

*"By working with the Shriver Center's Racial Justice Institute, we will direct resources to removing racial barriers to accessing safe and secure affordable housing."*

– Susan Reif, Housing Specialist

## GLSP's Statement on Racial Justice May 21, 2020

Given the toll that Covid-19 has taken on people of color including one of our colleagues and other individuals that were close to us, and the killing of another young man of color, Ahmaud Arbery, we join to take a stand. We unite together to make our voice heard on these important issues.

Georgia Legal Services Program's mission is to provide civil legal services to persons with low incomes, creating equal access to justice and opportunities out of poverty. Poverty often is the result of discrimination, most often based on race. Despite GLSP's history of challenging discrimination, bigotry and racism are too prevalent in Georgia.

We condemn racism, bigotry, sexism, and all forms of discrimination. We provide legal services to clients regardless of their race, sex, national origin, gender or sexual orientation.

We condemn violence. We value all people and believe that all people should be treated with dignity and respect. All people should feel safe to live and work free from violence or the threat of violence.

Our staff unites to reaffirm our commitment to fight for full inclusion for all, equality and justice. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, "[i]njustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." We stand up to the challenge allied with our staff and clients. We believe that advancing equality and inclusion are fundamental to the success of Georgia and the nation.

# Final Adoption Hearing Proceeds Remotely During COVID-19

By Katie Woei-A-Sack, Staff Attorney, Kinship Care Program, and Jeanette Burroughs, Development Director



Three-year-old Bre'Shona Mitchell had been living with her paternal grandparents, Mr. and Ms. Bobby and Sabrina Mitchell since she was four months old. Her mother left her with her grandparents and moved away. Mr. Mitchell had terminal cancer, but he felt strongly about providing a stable home for Bre'Shona and providing for her financially. It was his wish to adopt Bre'Shona, but Mr. Mitchell passed away on October 13, 2019, leaving his wife to carry out Bre'Shona's adoption. The adoption petition that Ms. Mitchell filed had so many gaps, the judge was not able to complete the adoption. The Superior Court clerk in the small town knew about the Mitchell family's loss and about Georgia Legal Services. The clerk reached out, and GLSP's Kinship Care Program agreed to represent Ms. Mitchell in her adoption. Ms. Mitchell obtained a final adoption order on April 22, 2020, but the final adoption

hearing could not be held in the courtroom under Chief Justice Melton's emergency order during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the courtroom judge was willing to hold Bre'Shona's adoption hearing via Zoom. The Superior Court clerk expressed, "It is not often that people come to court and leave with such joy as Ms. Mitchell. It was especially rewarding considering the difficult times that are upon us." Bre'Shona has a permanent home with her loving grandmother, and she will be able to obtain social security survivor's benefits from her late grandfather, whose wish for Bre'Shona was fulfilled.

Georgia Legal Services and Atlanta Legal Aid work in partnership to provide free civil legal representation under a statewide Kinship Care Program for grandparents and other caregivers who are providing for the care of children who are not their own. Many of these children are displaced and would likely be placed in the state's foster care system without legal representation and support. In its first year of operation in 2019, the Kinship Care Program represented 363 clients and 563 children, and is estimated to have saved state taxpayers \$1.8 million in foster care costs.

## Will You Help Close the Justice Gap in Georgia?



**Donate to GLSP at [www.glsp.org](http://www.glsp.org) (click on "Get Involved")!**

GLSP is vital to our state's front-line response to COVID-19's impact on the health, economic stability, and safety of 68% of Georgia's poverty population. Please give generously!



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# Remembering Our Colleague Rowena Daniels

From the GLSP Albany Staff



Rowena joined the GLSP Albany office  
as a staff attorney in April 2019

**O**n April 5, 2020, we bid farewell to Rowena Daniels who died at age 49. The world lost a wonderful human being, and the GLSP Albany office lost a beloved staff member. The Albany staff remember Rowena as more than an attorney. She was a friend, a mentor, a colleague, and a wonderful asset to the legal profession. Before embarking on her legal career, Rowena spent many years as a licensed clinical social worker. She worked previously at Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital in the Behavioral Unit. After obtaining her law degree from Florida A & M University Law School, Rowena was General Counsel at Albany State University. Rowena joined the Albany office of Georgia Legal Services in April 2019. As a “new” staff attorney, Rowena was most interested in tackling new cases; assisting the most difficult clients; and striving to resolve every legal issue she could. Her extensive background allowed her to work closely with clients who suffered from mental health conditions. Rowena’s patience and kind spirit allowed her to address situations with the utmost grace and compassion. She assisted clients in a variety of legal issues with the majority of clients receiving a satisfactory outcome. Senior clients held a special place in her heart. Rowena LOVED her senior clients. Rowena was a quiet, sweet, loving co-worker. She had a great sense of humor. She saw the good in everything. Rowena was a joy to have in the office. She is loved by everyone in the Albany Office.

– Cheryl Griffin, Managing Attorney

I absolutely adored Rowena. She was really true to herself and others. She was always willing to help out with anything when there was a need. She loved her clients, and they loved her. Rowena worked hard for her clients. She truly loved GLSP and what it stands for. She will be missed beyond words.

– Clara Hubbard, Regional Operations Manager

Rowena was a co-worker who became a friend. She had the sweetest spirit, and she lived her life with intention. Rowena was a dedicated attorney with a compassionate heart. She loved her clients, her church activities, and community work. Rowena was the person who introduced our colleague, Tina Battle, and me to the Tropical Taste Restaurant’s turkey wings, rice, and spinach, which we enjoyed every Tuesday and Thursday. She had to have hot sauce on her turkey wings. I will miss our talks, her energy, and seeing her in the office.

– Rhonda Bass, Supervising Attorney

Rowena was a highly intelligent and dedicated attorney. When she had a work assignment or presentation, she was always well prepared and did a great job. She had a quiet and serious demeanor around those who did not know her. She, also, had an adorable smile, a cute dimple, and a great sense of humor. She told some really funny personal stories. She jokingly claimed that she had an alter ego named “Rowinda,” who was not as kind as Rowena. But, none of us ever got to meet “Rowinda.” Rowena loved her family and talked about them daily. She was proud of her sister, Lovely. She was active in her church. She loved turkey wings and chicken wings, and she invited several of her co-workers to join her in weekly turkey wing lunches! She was a pleasure to work with and a valued friend and co-worker. We will miss Rowena everyday.

– Elena Albamonte, Staff Attorney

I will always remember Rowena’s pleasant personality and smiles. I will miss her stopping by my office just to say “hey...how you doing today...you alright?” Rowena wasn’t just a co-worker to me, she was like family. She was compassionate about her clients, and she was always willing to go beyond to help them. She had a “big heart,” and she didn’t mind helping anyone she could. She loved her sister, Lovely, and her mom so much. Rowena was a jewel. I truly miss her.

– Lorilynn Daniel, Paralegal

I only worked with Rowena for a short time, but, during that time, she was a very nice person to work with, and I am glad I had the pleasure of knowing her. Rowena will be missed!

– Tina Whindleton, Administrative Assistant



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