

ECL Thrives in Dallas Legal Community

BY LINDSAY DRENNAN

Two years after its launch, the Entrepreneurs in Community Lawyering (ECL) program is thriving and providing a unique pathway for Dallas attorneys to combine their entrepreneurial spirit with a commitment to providing affordable legal services.

Started in 2019 by **Laura Benitez Geisler** during her year as DBA president, the program provides mentoring, office space, and training specific to starting a successful small business. The ECL attorney incubator program is the first of its kind in Dallas and, as the name suggests, provides its participants with a year of “incubation” in addition to business training. Not only do ECL participants launch their own firms, but as part of the program, they commit to performing 200 hours of pro bono service per year.

Saedra Pinkerton, director of the program, is proud of the progress the first ECL class has made. Reflecting on the inaugural class, she said, “helping the first group of ECL attorneys start new practices in the fall of 2019 was an exciting process I thought couldn’t be topped. But seeing them pivot to meet the challenges of the pandemic, all while hustling to create these thriving businesses, has been absolutely remarkable. Their hard work and dedication to serving everyday people continues to impress me, and I hope that the entire Dallas Bar Association shares my pride.”

“It’s the best thing I could have ever done,” said **Kate Kim**. In the short

time her business law, IP, probate and estate planning firm has been open, she has been able to meet 160 percent of her revenue goal for 2020, hire on her first employee and join the Board of an emerging legal nonprofit. She attributes her success in part to the business skills she learned through ECL. She noted that not all law firm owners know how

overlooked group of individuals who earn too much to qualify for many pro bono options, but would struggle to pay steep legal fees for an unexpected legal need. ECL’s unique approach develops firms with the capacity to serve this portion of the Dallas community.

Meanwhile, **Megan Erinakes** says she could not have started her own

word about her firm.

By any measure, the program has been, and continues to be, a success. ECL’s first class launched nine firms across a wide spectrum of practice areas, each positioned for success in both business and pro bono representation. The 2019-2020 class, which also includes lawyers **Blessing Ananti** (estate planning, business law), **Robert Anderson** (family law, estate planning, and immigration), **Tonyce Gustave** (business law and estate planning), **Tonya Jones-Craig** (family law, child welfare, and estate planning), **Noelle Vinson Saint-Jean** (special education law), and **John Vanbuskirk** (wills, trusts and probate), has already proved its commitment to providing community service and valuable legal representation through their firms. Each of these attorneys has weathered their first year of business facing not just the typical challenges of business ownership, but the added complication of a global pandemic.

As the second year of the program draws to a close, the first class provides inspiration not just for the ECL graduating class, but for the Dallas Bar at large.

Interested in learning more or applying for a future class? Get more information on the ECL at www.dallasbar.org/ecl or <https://fb.me/DBAECL>. **HN**

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to be entrepreneurs, but ECL provided great resources in business building, bookkeeping, firm management and marketing—important skills for a small business, but not skills typically covered in law school.

Justin Bynum also credits the skills he learned in ECL with helping him weather the changing business conditions of the ongoing pandemic. At a time when many have seen business slow, he has experienced nearly 30 percent growth in his mixed family and civil law practice. The flexibility in his practice to help the community through pro bono and “low bono” representation has been a highlight of building his business through ECL. Those individuals who benefit from “low bono” representation form an often-

firm so quickly without participating in ECL. Like her fellow participants, Ms. Erinakes highlights the important business skills she developed as well as the capacity to pursue her passion for community service. Ms. Erinakes had not even received her bar results when the program started, but now runs a thriving family law firm. Since opening her firm, she has assisted the low-income community by providing over 67 hours of pro bono work in the last six months, but has also used the knowledge she gained from ECL to expand her marketing efforts, starting both a blog and newsletter to share the