

Businesswomen apply professional skills to aid community

BY PAOLA IUSPA

Giving pro-bono legal advice to indigents with AIDS, fighting for equal rights for gays and lesbians, and making the neighborhood a better place for area workers are how three businesswomen apply the skills they use in their profession to help the community.

Every day, Caryn Vogel said, she goes to her law office in downtown Miami to help indigent people infected with AIDS who are in need of legal services.

Some of the most challenging cases, she said, involve finding new homes for children whose parents died from complications from AIDS or HIV, the virus that often leads to the disease.

Child custody, visitation rights and employment discrimination are common issues for Ms. Vogel, executive director and sole full-time employee of HELP Inc., which stands for HIV Education & Law Project.

"In a way it is hard because we are running in the red," she said of the nonprofit she created in 1996 that survives on grants and donations. "But I love what I do."

She founded HELP after



Photo by Maxine Usdan

Teresa Boyd of BankUnited applies financial expertise to make Brickell a nicer place to live and work.

said, is among the top three counties in the US in number of people infected.

"Youth is the most affected," she said. "We don't talk to them much about prevention, and heterosexual teenagers who think they are indestructible are the most at risk."

Ms. Vogel said she recognized

peers. The Young Lawyers Division of the Florida Bar Association in June recognized Ms. Vogel as the state's "Most Outstanding Young Lawyer" for her work.

From her office on the busy Lincoln Road mall in Miami Beach, Elizabeth Schwartz, a 1997 UM graduate, also took it

"It is challenging to negotiate those breakups."

She said her work involves sitting down with couples to focus on what they would want to happen to their spouse in case of incapacity or death.

Five years after she started her practice, Ms. Schwartz said, she is noticing more people are

on enhancing the quality of life and economic development of the Brickell area. Some of its members represent office, retail and residential developments.

Ms. Boyd, who joined the association two years ago, is also a member of the group's executive committee and a subcommittee charged with developing a new interactive website.

Ms. Boyd said she got involved with the association as soon as her bank opened an office in Brickell and she was transferred to Miami-Dade from Broward.

Efforts in which she has been involved include successfully bringing more police to the area to monitor traffic on the avenue, where bottlenecks are an everyday event.

The association also received grants to help pay for an area-streetscape study, which is now under way, she said. "We want to make Brickell Avenue a more desirable place for those who work here."

Another way Ms. Boyd uses the skills of her banking profession outside the workplace is by volunteering at public schools for one hour every Monday before work. She talks to 7th graders about money, ways to manage it and ways to

graduating from the University of Miami law school, said Ms. Vogel.

"My father is a lawyer," she said. "And I always knew I wanted to be one."

She started training for what she does with HELP in 1994 by volunteering for HIV- and AIDS-related law and litigation projects. She said there is a lot of groundwork to be done in Miami-Dade to educate people, especially teenagers, about HIV.

Miami-Dade, Ms. Vogel

Ms. Vogel said she conceived HELP following the death of a close friend infected with HIV the year before Ms. Vogel started law school. She said the most difficult part of her job now is raising funds. While the nonprofit has a \$300,000 annual operating budget, Ms. Vogel got only \$120,000 in funding this year.

Her work is catching people's attention, Ms. Vogel said, and six years after beginning her practice she is gaining recognition among her

1997 UM graduate, also took it upon herself to use her professional training to guarantee equal rights to the gay and lesbian community. She said her main challenge now is to inform voters to retain a county law that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. The county commission enacted the law in 1998, but a group opposing it is asking voters to repeal the item in a Sept. 10 referendum.

Representing gay, lesbian, bisexuals and transsexuals as well as straight people, Ms. Schwartz said her law firm concentrates its practice on co-parenting agreements, co-habitation agreements, living wills, wills, guardianship and health-care surrogates.

Ms. Schwartz said she realized she had a skill to mobilize the community in 1997 when she was lobbying to get the equal rights law passed by the Miami-Dade commission.

Another area she tackles at work has to do with legal contracts that ensure that same-sex partners inherit or receive some of the assets when a long-term relationship ends. Those rights come by default when heterosexuals get married, she said.

"Breakups are so intense," Ms. Schwartz said. "You often cannot be objective when making decisions. Some say they don't have a legal obligation to the partner and walk away with all the money. If you are heterosexual and get divorced, you automatically get a share. But gay couples don't. They can build assets together for years and in a breakup, they are out of luck

she is noticing more people are looking for legal representation.

"It seems more people are not willing to walk away empty-handed from long-time relationships where promises were made," she said.

Teresa Boyd, vice president for BankUnited, said she applies her financial expertise to making Brickell Avenue, also known as Miami's financial district, a nicer place to live.

Ms. Boyd serves as treasurer of the Brickell Area Association, an organization focused

ways to manage it and ways to make it when they become adults. She said she likes to pitch the concept of a college education and how that could result in higher-paying jobs.

"I take money for them to pass around to see whose face is on each bill," she said. "We talk about what it would take to buy a car, a house or anything they want. I always try to find a transition to talk about college. I try to explain how money works in a very simple way. It is a gratifying experience."

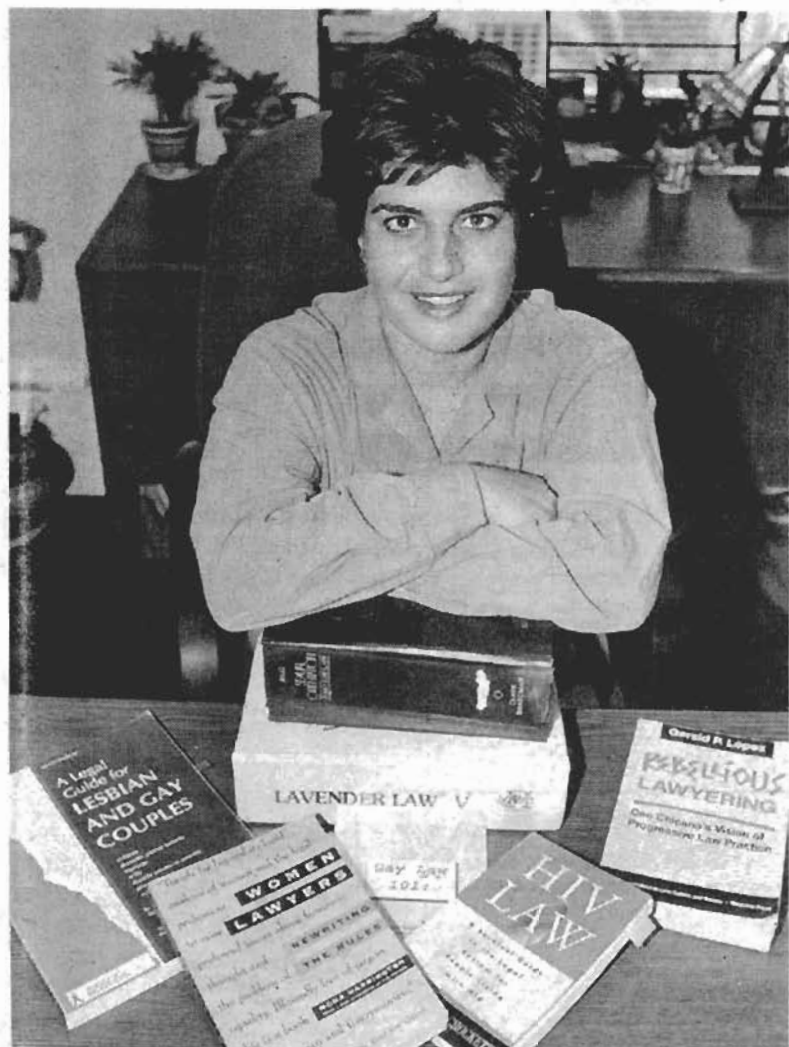


Photo by Maxine Usdan

Elizabeth Schwartz uses her expertise to aid gays and lesbians



Photo by Marlene Quaroni

Garryn Vogel provides AIDS-infected indigents with legal services