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EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

A Legal Advocate for Social Justice



By [RALPH BLUMENTHAL](#)

A lawyer for the dispossessed — tenants in neglected buildings in the Bronx, auto shops in Willets Point fighting city eviction, credit-card holders dunned by debt buyers, and Chinese-food delivery workers and nannies demanding, at least, minimum wage — that's Harvey Epstein. As community development director at the Urban Justice Center in the financial district, Mr. Epstein, 42, who has 20 years in social causes, leads a staff of 20 lawyers, paralegals and researchers who provide free counsel to groups helping low-income people with legal problems.

The roots of activism: I had a social studies degree from Ithaca College, but teaching jobs were hard to come by. I got a job running a homeless shelter in Hempstead, Long Island. After a year, it was burned down — by one of the residents, unfortunately. I worked for a [foster care](#) agency in the South Bronx. That was not for me. I didn't have the skill set. I was overwhelmed by the system. I saw lawyers all the time who could really help people. I went to CUNY Law School in Flushing and started working at Queens Legal Services, then Legal Aid. Instead of helping one family not get evicted, I would use lawyering as an aggressive tool to help the lives of low-income people.

Office décor: That's a photo of Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), who has a photo of Gandhi behind him. That's me on a front page of The Daily News at a rally to renew the rent laws in 1997. I got good coverage that day.

Behind the battles over housing: These companies bought buildings for way too much. Now they're trying to push out rent-regulated tenants. Some property owners are walking away, but some are trying to upgrade their buildings. We can help them figure out what kind of government programs are available.

Other issues: Some baby sitters get \$2 an hour. Some immigrants from the Philippines work 50 and 60 hours a week and still don't make the \$7.15 minimum wage. No overtime if they work more than 40 hours. We're also doing debt-defense against predatory lending practices. Maybe you charged \$200 on a Macy's card and forgot about it. Eight years later, you have a \$6,000 judgment against you, or maybe you're not the same Mary Smith. We'll represent people in those cases.

What he pays his baby sitter: More than the minimum wage. We pay her on the books. I get a tax advantage, and the reality is, it's the right thing to do.

Best thing he's learned: To operate quickly, to gather facts quickly.

Why he does it: I'm going to be 75, hopefully, one day, and looking back on my existence on the planet. Hopefully, I will have saved thousands and thousands of lives.

His housing situation: We have a three-bedroom co-op at Fourth Street and Avenue A, my wife and I — she's a lawyer with a union. It's economically and racially diverse. Our kids have friends that are Japanese, French and Arabic. They all play the same games.

Rules for living: I compost, I use reusable bottles. I do [yoga](#).

What's on his iPod: I'm too old for an iPod. But I got a [Facebook](#).

Why he wears an earring in each ear: I've had them since college. It seemed normal. I used to have more.